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Nature rituals of the early medieval church in Britain

Christian cosmology and the conversion of the British landscape from Germanus to Bede

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Christian cosmology and the conversion of the British landscape from Germanus to Bede

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies ritual interactions between saints and the landscape, animals and elements during a three-hundred year period from 410 AD. Such interactions include negotiations about and with birds and other animals, exorcism of the sea, lakes and rivers, and immersion in these natural bodies of water for devotional purposes. Although writers of the period lacked a term such as 'nature' to describe this sphere of activity, it is demonstrated that the natural world was regarded as a dimension of creation distinctively responsive to Christian ritual.

Systematic study of the context in which these rituals were performed finds close connection with missionary negotiations aimed at lay people. It further reveals that three British writers borrowed from Sulpicius Severus' accounts of eastern hermits, reworking older narratives to suggest that non-human aspects of creation were not only attracted to saints but were changed by and participated in Christian ritual and worship.

Natural bodies of water attracted particularly intense interaction in the form of exorcism and bathing, sufficiently widely documented to indicate a number of discrete families of ritual were developed. In northern Britain, acute anxieties can be detected about the cultural and spiritual associations of open water, requiring missionary intervention to challenge pre-Christian narratives through biblical and liturgical resources, most notably baptism. Such a cosmological stretch appears to have informed a 'Celtic' deviation in baptismal practice that emphasised exorcism and bodily sacrifice.

Nature rituals were a systematic response to the challenges of the British intellectual and physical landscapes, revealing the shape of an underlying missionary strategy based on mainstream patristic theology about the marred relationship between humans and the rest of creation. St Ambrose emerges as the most influential theologian at the time when the early church was shaping its British inculturation, most notably led by St Germanus' mission in 429.

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Abbreviations

CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
DLS	De locis sanctis
HE	Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*
MGH SS rer. Germ	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum
MGH SS rer. Merov	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
PL	Patrologia Latina
SC	Sources Chrétiennes, Les Editions du cerf
VCA	The Anonymous *Vita sancti Cuthberti*
VCM	Bede's Metrical *Vita sancti Cuthberti*
VCP	Bede's Prose *Vita sancti Cuthberti*
VGM	Vita Gregorii Magni (the Whitby *Life* of pope Gregory the Great)
VSG	Vita sancti Guthlaci

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

During the establishment of Christianity in Britain from the 5th to 7th centuries, holy men and women are described as engaging intensively with what in modern terms would be called the natural world. Such engagements include devotional bathing in the sea and rivers, exorcising areas of wilderness and open water, and interacting with birds and other animals. Near contemporary writers such as Bede and Felix, the author of the *Vita sancti Guthlaci*, drew attention to the significance of such activities as a single category of saintly activity, reworking material from the eastern desert accounts of Sulpicius Severus to depict spiritually charged landscapes in Britain's somewhat damper climate. This thesis concludes that these engagements formed a significant part of missionary strategy, deployed to reconfigure the relationship between people and place through the creative use of Christian narratives and ritual practices.

The subject of study is ritual behaviour, in the shape of formalised, bodily interactions between prominent Christian figures and the natural environment. It covers a period of major religious upheaveal, starting with the mission of Germanus in the early 5th century to regularise the British church and ending with the conversion of the final Anglo-Saxon tribes at the end of the 7th. The contextualised study of several saintly interventions in the natural world indicates that they formed part of a conscious missionary strategy to inculturate Christianity, and were particularly targeted at lay folk who were sceptical about the benefits of the new faith and unconvinced there could be a single God operating across all levels of creation.

As with all ritual behaviour, there are two dimensions that need to be considered: the physical performance of such devotional practices, and the underlying intellectual and theological concepts that are being expressed. This investigation gives equal weight to

the embodied reality of nature rituals, such as wading into the sea before dawn to pray, and the theological and liturgical precedents that inspired the missionaries into such eye-catching behaviour. This focus on the embodied reality of interventions in the natural world stands in contrast to the conceptual approaches by other scholars that interpret the hagiographical descriptions as literary devices or as expressions of moral, allegorical or theological ideas. Systematic study of the bodily performance of bathing rituals reveals the underlying shapes of baptismal practices, the influence of St Ambrose proving particularly decisive. His combination of exorcism directed at the water with an emphasis on bodily sacrifice and a partial immersion for foot washing appears to have proved particularly resonant in northern British cultures, where attitudes towards natural bodies of water appear to be marked by suspicion and fear.

The identification of patristic influences from Ambrose and Sulpicius Severus on a Christian culture seemingly remote from mainstream theology and practice suggests that nature interaction formed part of a wider cosmology concerning the human relationship with creation and the environmental effects of sin. This appears to recover part of the missionary theology that drove the conversion of northern Britain and helped to define Celtic Christianity: any harshness in the environment had been precipitated by human sin, and could be reversed by Christian observance.

The primary research material for this study of outdoor ritual behaviour is a range of hagiographical and other texts written during or within a few decades of this period of mass conversion. Conducted as they were without buildings, structures or liturgical objects, such rituals have left no physical trace for the historian to set against this textual evidence. Analysing and comparing the surviving descriptions of these interactions however reveals similarities across otherwise independent texts, which suggests an underlying historical basis to the events described. Perhaps the most striking feature in this regard is that nature devotions are among the most physically

plausible spectacles to be found in hagiographical texts, many of them capable of being recreated in identical fashion today should an observer feel so moved.

Devotional bathing, the exorcism of natural water and ritual interactions with birds are eye-catching, evocative and richly suggestive expressions of faith, yet have only received limited systematic study to determine their meaning and purpose, and no recent study into the extent to which such activities form recognisable families of rituals. This thesis seeks to fill that gap by contextualising such activities within their immediate place in the narrative and then drawing comparisons with similar accounts in different texts. This helps to determine how far such activities were dependent on practices developed and recorded elsewhere in Christian culture and how far they were adapted to the circumstances of Britain. It also helps to determine further whether these descriptions were simply hagiographical topoi borrowed for literary effect, or whether they describe historical ritual practices that were actually performed.

This study aims to counterbalance a large body of creative reinterpretation and speculation about the nature of Celtic Christianity and its apparent sympathy for the natural world with a rigorous study of nature rituals in their immediate context. It aims to systematically categorise the range of bathing devotions in particular into recognisable ritual families in order to understand how such practices once formed part of mainstream Christian culture. The project will thus help to unravel some of the origins of the British landscape character and the narratives attached to it. It will also inform modern trends in religion, such as growing concern about the environment and rising interest in the Celtic church, as well as Neo-Paganism, New Age spirituality, fresh expressions of Christianity such as the Forest Church and theology of the body.

1.1 Previous academic interpretation

Devotional interaction with the landscape, animals and elements is widely considered to represent a form of Christianity that was more concerned with the natural world than subsequent iterations of the religion. Fifty years before the completion of this thesis, one of the most significant early academic papers on Christianity and the environment, Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', noted Celtic Christianity's intense interaction with nature but judged it to be unsympathetic, without citing evidence:

> Legends of saints, especially the Irish saints, had long told of their dealings with animals but always, I believe, to show their human dominance over creatures.[1]

Other commentators have also noted the regular appearance of animals, and nature motifs more generally, and have tended to evaluate their relationship with humans as more harmonious. Popular and academic writers alike offer a few clusters of interpretation: Celtic Christians lived "close to nature",[2] displayed "proto-ecological impulses",[3] or dressed up pagan practices with a Christian veneer to create a syncretic religion.[4] Citations of all these interpretations appear throughout the following research. There is some evidence to support all three of them, but this topic finds its fullest and richest meaning only when placed in a context that connects the rituals to each other and to the wider concerns of the period. For example, pagan superstitions about the dangers of natural bodies of water certainly help to explain why Christians were so keen to offer a memorable narrative in response, but for reasons that will be presented below that is at

[1] Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', *Science*, 155 (1967), pp 1203–7, at p 1207.
[2] Alister McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature* (London: Doubleday, 2003), p 34.
[3] Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p 366-7.
[4] A widespread interpretation, starkly put in Pamela Berger, *The Goddess Obscured* (London: Robert Hale Ltd, 1988); Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Oxford: OUP, 1991).

some remove from the acceptance of a compromise in order to make the missionaries' task easier. Such an instinct to find syncretic interpretations for devotional actions in the landscape has been questioned recently by scholars.[5]

It will not, therefore, be assumed uncritically that early saints practised a syncretic mix of paganism and Christianity, which the later church eventually cleansed. The earliest Christians in Britain and Ireland were educated to a degree substantially higher than the native population, and were introducing a religion with greater conceptual sophistication than what we understand of insular or Germanic paganism. Unlike missionaries in continental Europe and north Africa, they were not engaging with minds steeped in classical philosophy and literature, nor even with a religion that had a rival proselytising impulse, but with one that saw gods and spirits enmeshed in the fabric of every day life, nature included. In other words, there were certainly pagan narratives to out-narrate, but that does not mean the missionaries had to find hybrid solutions, but rather adaptive ones. Britain's landscape was already replete with spiritual meaning and culturally significant landmarks, and a strategic missionary engagement with it helped in the conversion of the people and their culture to a new faith. This was particularly important during a period when the church lacked any sort of ecclesiastical or organisational infrastructure in Britain, and was required to improvise. Pope Gregory the Great himself instructs his missionaries to reuse pagan temples set in groves for a community's first place of Christian worship, without question a transitional arrangement.[6]

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[5] Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p 36 and n. 50 for examples of syncretic interpretations. Walsham advises caution in use of the term syncretism to describe an intentional process on the grounds that boundaries between paganism and Christianity were more fluid than might be supposed. A similar reservation is expressed in Martin Carver's introduction to *Signals of Belief in Early England: Anglo-Saxon Paganism Revisited*, ed. by Martin Carver, Alex Sanmark, and Sarah Semple (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), p 21.

[6] Bede *HE* I.30.

1.2 The primary research material

This thesis studies a period for which there is relatively little historical evidence, a 300-year period from the end of direct Roman rule in Britain in *c*. 410 to the conversion of the last tribes in Britain to Christianity around the year 700. It uses the term 'conversion era' to describe this period, although its dates do not align with the study by Barbara Yorke, whose book *The Conversion of Britain* confines itself to the years 600-800.[7] The missionary work to the Picts by St Columba in the 6th century, which forms a major part of this study, and possibly by St Ninian in the early 5th century, were very much part of the transition to Christianity and by themselves justify this extension of the term 'conversion era' to these earlier centuries. The date range 600-800 more accurately applies to the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England rather than Britain collectively.

The research focuses with particular attention on the contexts in which hagiographies, Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* and other texts describe these interactions, in order to interrogate the cultural, theological, liturgical, social and missiological meanings that were attached to them. This interrogation requires the use of a range of methodologies in order to build up the broadest possible understanding of the rituals and their contexts. Hagiographies, which provide most of the primary research material, were written with just such a multi-layered reading in mind, presenting the reader with biography, theology, history, literature and moral instruction, among other facets.

One methodology merits particular mention at the outset, which is to consider the practical considerations and physical plausibility of the descriptions of such intense activities, which will be held in tension with their survival in literary form. This interdisciplinary framework is used to study one aspect of the natural world that

[7] Barbara Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain 600-800* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2006).

received particular focus, which is water and the ritual interactions directed towards it, most notably exorcism and devotional bathing.

The great majority of historical evidence concerning ritual interaction with nature from this period is textual, and mostly from the genre of hagiography, particularly a cluster of texts written around the year 700.[8] The two most significant non-hagiographical texts are Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* and Gildas' *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*. Comparative study of all these texts reveals different levels of discourse about the conversion process, an overt emphasis on the use of royal prerogative by tribal leaders in discussion with senior missionaries, and a less explicit backdrop of spectacular interventions in nature to impress sceptical common folk. As will be demonstrated in chapter 4, historians have tended to prefer the royal discourse as a model for the conversion of Britain, following the narrative presented most clearly in Bede's *Historia*, but the more marginal evidence of other texts suggests that other strategies were required beyond formal negotiations between leaders.

As this situation indicates, the surviving historical evidence presents a number of problems. The textual records greatly favour the more orderly and intellectual accounts of conversion, which leaves the more marginal evidence of an intense focus on nature uncontextualised, a richly suggestive field of narratives that invite any number of creative interpretations by scholars into the modern age. There are gaps across all categories of historical evidence, the lack of corroboration between textual records and material culture in particular a reminder of the need for caution. Some of the specific problems that hagiographical writings present to the modern scholar are considered in a section on the methodologies that are most suited to interrogating such formulaic

[8] Although many Welsh hagiographies also contain a notable focus on interactions with the landscape and animals, they are not considered as primary evidence for this research since they date almost entirely from the 11th century onwards.

accounts. Material culture sheds almost no light on the rituals studied in this research, devotional bathing in particular leaving no trace on the landscape. Interactions with the natural world were precisely that, activities that took place without any built infrastructure. While royal and elite conversions have left material evidence to corroborate the textual record, nature rituals have not. The topographic detail of some of the locations where bathing took place can offer a degree of context, the rocky inlet at Coldingham where St Cuthbert's nocturnal bathing with sea creatures supposedly occurred being a case in point.

As a measure of how far this gap between textual and material evidence extends, it instructive to note that all the hagiographical material about Cuthbert contains not a single reference to devotion to the Virgin Mary, and just one passing reference to her in the *VCA*.[9] Yet the same saint's wooden coffin has the earliest depiction of the Virgin and Child anywhere in the western world outside Rome. The coffin is thought to date from 698, just 12 years after the saint's death, and was designed for open display in the church at Lindisfarne. In like manner, the absence of any record of major female missionaries in Britain merits reflection. Royal women found great prominence as the leaders of major monastic communities in the early church, suggesting that some sort of spiritual role for women ran deep in the cultures of the island. It is argued in this thesis that the monasteries, including their hagiographical writings, were preoccupied with instructing and encouraging the laity, but beyond that there can only be speculation as to the role that their abbesses must have served in fulfilling this mission.

In recent times scholars have attempted to determine how far Christianity was inculturated into everyday belief and practice by the time Roman rule came to an end in *c*. 410, which would be a useful reference point for the situation during the main

[9] *VCA* I.3.

conversion era, but conclude that the extent is currently unknowable based on the evidence available.[10] Clouded in similar uncertainty is the way in which cultural, ethnic and religious transitions were shaped by the arrival of Anglo-Saxons. For all the efforts of historians, the material evidence, genetic evidence and written evidence remain notoriously difficult to reconcile, the most recent research concluding that it is unknowable to any degree of certainty:

> When the historical evidence for other conquests and occupations of parts of Britain in the ancient and medieval periods – the Roman, Viking and Norman – is compared with the archaeological, it makes a reasonably good match... In the case of the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, the two are at present bewilderingly adrift, and lost in the gap is the reality of what happened to Romano-British religions in eastern Britain.[11]

1.3 Thesis structure

This research interrogates a long, transitional period of British history and employs a number of methodologies in order to approach the topic of ritual interaction with nature from many angles, which are described in chapter 2. Chapter 3 explores some of the underlying assumptions and concepts that shape this research, in particular the concept of 'nature' as a category to describe the various phenomena in creation that are the focus of saintly activity. It also briefly considers the term 'Celtic' as a descriptor for both ethnic identity and Christian culture.

The thesis proceeds to a detailed examination of the primary sources. Chapter 4 introduces a new perspective on nature rituals by undertaking a systematic study of three incidents recorded in early texts in which sceptical lay folk present a challenge to missionaries over the authenticity of the Christian faith. Selected primarily because they record critical views of Christianity, and hence have a degree of authenticity about

[10] David Petts, 'How Christian Was Late Roman Britain?', *Current Archaeology*, 204 (2006), pp 648–51.
[11] Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 2014), p 296-7.

them, it becomes clear that the way in which saints managed to counter such hostility successfully was through a spectacular intervention in the natural world, providing the first substantial evidence of a strategic purpose to nature rituals. Chapter 5 turns to a detailed search for the sources on which writers base their narratives about nature interaction, and establishes that they were an innovative adaptation of eastern desert traditions as recorded by Sulpicius Severus. This is the first indication that the Christianity of Britain was more influenced by patristic tradition than is immediately apparent, adapted from the arid landscapes of the east into unfamiliar devotional patterns in the watery places of more northern climes.

The final section of this thesis then undertakes a detailed examination of the expression of Christian ritual in one specific environment, natural bodies of water. Approaching the subject from a number of angles, including theological, liturgical, performative and cultural dimensions, it finds persistently similar themes emerging across these methods of interrogation that set such interactions within the Christian practice of baptism. Chapter 6 begins by seeking a context for devotional immersion, considering its possible origins as an ascetic practice in eastern Christianity before noting pronounced differences in British forms of bathing and related water rituals that suggest a focus on the effects on the water itself. It turns to considers the evidence for pre-Christian cultural associations with all such bodies of water, with particular focus on the anxieties expressed in Pictish areas during the mission of St Columba, and identifies the specific ritual practice of exorcising water as a Christian response, setting out a narrative chain for this practice that can be traced back to the mission of St Germanus in the early 5th century. It then presents a significant liturgical dimension that has not been proposed by previous scholarship, a connection with baptismal practice that clusters around the liturgical and theological innovations of St Ambrose of Milan.

Chapter 7 focuses on the most celebrated example of devotional bathing in Britain, St Cuthbert's immersion at Coldingham, where he is joined on the sands afterwards by a pair of friendly sea creatures who dry his feet. Recent academic study has focused on monastic hospitality as a paradigm for this foot-washing ritual, but the research proposes an additional context, once again in the shape of baptismal practice and in particular the status of foot washing as part of this liturgy. It then interrogates the different accounts of Cuthbert's bathing contained in the *vita* written by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne and in Bede's two versions of this *vita*, a metrical and prose composition. It uses a methodology that focuses on the embodied implications of the ritual descriptions to discern some important differences in the way in which these two writers describe the physical actions of the bathing ritual. It concludes that two different families of bathing ritual can be identified, one associated with monasteries of an Ionan heritage that had a focus on asceticism, mortification and partial immersion while clothed, and another, favoured by Bede and others, that stressed full-bodied immersion accompanied by songs of praise. These two different expressions of Christian ritual are then compared in chapter 8 to differences in baptismal practice in Britain, in particular the way in which such differences became the subject of dispute between Celtic Christianity and the church established by missionaries from Rome at Canterbury. Chapter 9 suggests that these differences can be traced through liturgical texts to a marked contrast in baptismal liturgy as performed in Milan under Ambrose, with its emphasis on foot washing and crucifixion imagery, and in Roman practice where full-bodied immersion was performed and articulated in terms of a rebirth, a word that features prominently in Bede's brief description of the nature of the Celtic/Roman baptismal dispute. This raises the important question of how such patristic theology might have become engrained in early medieval British baptismal practice, exploring the reasons why the efficacy of baptism in removing the effects of original sin inherited

from Adam and Eve can be understood in terms of an anti-Pelagian missionary drive. By way of conclusion, chapter 10 widens out the significance of these findings to locate the cultural and spiritual power of such liturgical engagements with the natural world in the physical landscapes of Britain, resolving anxieties about the spiritual dangers of creation and serving as a means of harmonising human relationships with the cosmos through the pivotal agency of the body.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology and literature review

A range of methodologies is used in this research in order to build up a detailed picture from as many perspectives as possible of the topic under investigation. By its very nature, ritual in any context will benefit from different methods of examination because it is both a physical expression involving the body and also a manifestation of intellectual concepts, the seen and unseen elements only fully understandable in the context of each other.[12]

A recent PhD thesis by Britton Brooks (2016) that also examines the interaction of early British saints with the natural world does not offer a discussion of methodology, but it is clear that the author is primarily engaging with the texts as literary creations, bringing valuable insights into the construction of hagiographies.[13] He concludes that the descriptions of nature interactions also have an intense focus on the recognisable physical features of identifiable landscapes, and thus comes close to many of the findings of this thesis, that nature rituals were intended as popular demonstrations of the material agency of Christian spirituality. The research presented in this thesis continues this vector of enquiry beyond the confines of the monastery to the wider concerns of the people.

The first methodologies outlined below are established academic approaches that are particularly relevant to the topic under consideration: liturgical studies, ritual studies and hermeneutics. These three are complemented in this research by two other methodologies which have been adapted to work as precisely as possible with the

[12] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p 110 for a discussion of the seeing and non-seeing of ritualisation.
[13] Britton Brooks, 'The Reorientation of Creation in the Early Anglo-Saxon Vitae of Cuthbert and Guthlac' (Oxford, Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2016).

material under investigation: the 'criterion of embarrassment' which recovers critical attitudes towards Christianity by potential converts, and a new methodology based on reconstructing the bodily experience of performing rituals in the natural world.

2.1 Liturgical and ritual studies

Liturgical study of the early medieval period has been advanced by the publication in 2016 of *Understanding Medieval Liturgy*.[14] This book addresses one of the primary methodological needs of this research: how to study the history of ritual behaviour recorded in a range of texts, including hagiographies and formal liturgical documents.

As Helen Gittos writes, there is increasing recognition by scholars that there was far more diversity in medieval liturgy than has been recognised.[15] Previous conceptions that liturgical material is arcane and describes inflexible rites that were not subject to meaningful variation has been replaced by a more nuanced understanding. Indeed the first point that the introduction to *Understanding Medieval Liturgy* makes about the study of liturgy is that the term itself does not reflect an early medieval categorisation:

> In the Middle Ages, it was more common either to refer to specific types of texts – prayers, chants, ordines – or types of books – such as sacramentaries, antiphonaries, pontificals and rituals. When a collective noun was used it tended to be officia (offices). The modern use of 'liturgy' to apply to a more or less wide range of medieval ceremonies is therefore anachronistic.[16]

Research undertaken for this thesis suggests that ritual activities – including exorcising bodies of water and outdoor devotional bathing – have much more in common with what might be termed formal liturgy such as baptism than has previously been recognised. Scholarship concerning liturgical studies enables one to see the reason for

[14] *Understanding Medieval Liturgy*, ed. by Helen Gittos and Sarah Hamilton (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2016).
[15] Helen Gittos, 'Researching the History of Rites', in Gittos & Hamilton (2016), pp. 13–37.
[16] Gittos & Hamilton (2016), p 4-5.

this blurring of lines: the strict demarcation between sacramental liturgy and other ritual activity is a later distinction.

Recent methodologies developed for studying medieval liturgy are therefore applicable to the study of very early medieval rituals involving the natural world, albeit it with certain caveats. The conversion era is earlier than nearly all the liturgies and rites that are examined in *Understanding Medieval Liturgy*, a period from which there are very few liturgical texts, sacramentaries and compilations of *ordines* available for study, and no pontificals before the late 9th century.[17] There are however several early texts that preserve details of different baptismal rituals across northern Europe, which are used extensively in this research.

The primary research material for this thesis comprises for the most part hagiographical texts, but these are also considered valuable material by scholars working in the field of liturgical studies, recording as they do the ways in which saints performed various rituals. Several scholars writing in *Understanding Medieval Liturgy* demonstrate how such hagiographies can be used to examine the performance or practice of a range of rituals, finding particular value in comparing the lived or embodied experience of the saint with formal liturgical compositions.

With these points in mind, the methodology that Helen Gittos outlines seems highly applicable to the texts relevant to the conversion era:

> In order to make sense of any one version of a ritual it needs to be placed within its widest possible context, especially:
>
> • in relation to other versions of the same rite
> • in relation to other rituals to which it is related
> • within its manuscript context
> • within the historical contexts of the place and time when it was written and read.[18]

[17] *Ibid*. p 22.
[18] *Ibid.* p 23.

Gittos also advises that a scholar should cast a wide net and then narrow down, a comment that is particularly pertinent in the earliest church when there is limited material to work with and no explicit description of devotional bathing as a ritual category:

> The word 'family' has been used in several recent studies and is a useful analogy for describing rites that are more or less textually related to one another. People talk about identifying 'tell-tale signs', 'markers', 'signature features', 'symptoms', 'traits' or 'text elements' of one type of rite or another... I have repeatedly found in my own research that patterns are much easier to spot the more evidence one has. If you only look at a few sources it is hard to see what features are worth attending to, so it is important to examine material written over a long time span and from a wide geographical area.[19]

Liturgical studies does not offer the whole answer to the methodological challenges of reading descriptions of church ritual, and scholars in the field have made connections to the associated discipline of ritual studies, notably Frederick Paxton's chapter in *Understanding Medieval Liturgy*.[20] He also demonstrates the application of both of these disciplines to hagiographical material in his reconstruction of Cluniac death rites. He highlights the gap between the seemingly codified and orderly liturgical formula for dealing with death and the descriptions of raw grief contained in a hagiographical account of the death of an actual abbess, Hathumoda in 875.

This insight is of particular relevance to the research project on nature rituals, which attempts to reconstruct the actions as physical, kinaesthetic and sensory experiences as well as formulaic expressions of belief. Compared with other research that interrogates this period, more emphasis has been placed on the practicality and experience of conducting immersive rituals in the natural world in order to understand them as visible and bodily signs of belief rather than as intellectual and moral lessons, such as the need for obedience in monastic orders. The early Christians in Britain were confronted with a

[19] *Ibid*. p 25.
[20] Frederick S. Paxton, 'Researching Rites for the Dead and Dying', in Gittos & Hamilton (2016), pp. 39–56.

physical landscape in which to unfurl their missionary message, as real as the grief of nuns mourning the loss of a much-loved abbess.

Many different academic disciplines study ritual material, including the historians, liturgists and theologians cited above. However when ritual is considered at its most basic level – as an action that expresses an idea – the field starts to look intimidatingly large and open-ended. Many of those who study ritual draw on the methodologies and concepts developed by 20th century strands of structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, as well as the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, Marxism, psychoanalysis and performance theory. These would need to be used with care and restraint when approaching the fragile and fragmentary evidence to be found in early medieval Britain. In particular, those with a strong ideology would easily subsume the malleable and suggestive cultural traces found in the scant texts surviving from the period.

2.2 Hermeneutics: reading hagiography

In terms of a methodology for interpreting early medieval hagiographies in the fulness of their scope, the approaches outlined by Peter Turner in his 2012 book *Truthfulness, Realism, Historicity* provide an analytical approach specifically developed for the genre of texts that form the bedrock of this thesis.[21] Turner proposes ways of understanding hagiographies that avoid the pitfalls of a purely historical approach (trying to excavate the factual details hidden under hagiographical distortions) or a purely theological approach (focusing only on the religious ideas of the author/subject irrespective of their underlying historical veracity). Instead he demonstrates a critical approach based on the assumption that hagiographers essentially believe what they are writing, in accordance with their frequently claimed attempts at veracity in the prologues and throughout the

[21] Peter Turner, *Truthfulness, Realism, Historicity: A Study in Late Antique Spiritual Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2012).

texts. In other words, the conventions of the genre – which he terms 'hagiographical realism' – are a genuine attempt to communicate to readers both factual details of a saint's life and the higher truths that these details reveal through spiritual interpretation.

Turner's approach puts considerable emphasis on the construction of this form of realism, and the relationship not just between hagiographer and saint but between hagiographer and reader. It is instructive that a hagiographer often feels the need to reassure readers that the factual details of a miracle are true but never needs to argue the veracity of any higher, spiritual interpretation of this miracle. For example the 'miraculous' production of a well on the island of Lérins by St Honoratus (d. 429) recorded by Hilarius in his hagiography[22] might well be dismissed as the fortunate discovery of a natural landscape feature, but its connection to the example of Moses in the desert (Exodus 17:6) would bolster its credentials as a miracle beyond question.[23] In other words the truth of biblical events is more certain than the truth of observable events, even though both the hagiography and the Old Testament might contain essentially the same types of miracle. To doubt the miracle is to doubt its precedent in scripture, and hence to doubt the Bible.

There need to be some qualifications however when transferring Turner's approaches to the texts of the early British church. He focuses on Late Antique writers, who emerged from and wrote for a highly educated population, with a sophisticated understanding of literary genres. The early medieval Britons and Anglo-Saxons had little if any experience of classical education or the conventions of realist rhetorical devices.

[22] Hilarius: *Vita Honorati* (3.17).
[23] Turner (2012), p 98.

In Turner's examination of spiritual literature, realism is not merely a literary technique that might be deployed by, say, a 19th century novelist writing fiction, but it is rooted in a world view that shared certain assumptions with the reader:

> we must thus consider the literary techniques by which the sensible world was represented, the type of phenomena which are repeated and emphasized, as well as the particular philosophical significance that attaches to them. We must, in other words, describe the nature of hagiographical realism.[24]

It is concluded here that this is a methodology for reconciling within a reading of hagiography the different elements that have to be examined through separate methodologies: what a saint physically did when wading into the sea to pray, and what these actions might have meant in moral, theological, typological and anagogical terms. There is no single, over-arching methodology that will operate on the early medieval texts to recover the physical components of a nature ritual while simultaneously or consequently revealing their meaning for the saint who performed them, the author who wrote about them and the audience who read about them within their cultural and theological context. But there are ways to reconcile these different strands, and to ensure that the findings of one methodology can not be asserted without reference to the others. As Turner points out, even a historian as magisterial as Peter Brown employs different methodologies in order to get to his own 'thick description' of the mix of spiritual and historical significance of the Late Antique holy man.[25]

2.3 The 'criterion of embarrassment' and historical revisionism

One methodology employed productively in this research is a specialised form of study based on the notion that writers are at times obliged to record historical details that they find awkward or embarrassing, details which are highly unlikely to be invented. This methodology has mostly been developed by academics studying the early Christian

[24] *Ibid.* p 43.
[25] *Ibid*. p 12-13.

church, whose own writers were obliged at times to record historical events that sat uncomfortably with their belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, most notably his baptism at the start and crucifixion at the end of his public ministry.[26] The situation of the early church has a number of interesting parallels with the establishment of the early medieval British church during the conversion era.

Ronald Hutton offers some of the most perceptive analysis of the changing uses and meanings of the natural world during the conversion era, perhaps because his concern is to approach pre-Christian beliefs as a topic worthy of academic study in its own right. He also refers in passing to a methodology that is remarkably close to the 'criterion of embarrassment', describing incidents recorded by Bede in his writings about St Cuthbert:

> These are still tales recorded at second and third hand, but the cultural setting they portray, of a resentful and confused local populace, still unsteady in its recently acquired religion, is not wholly creditable to Christianity and has a ring of truth about it. They also have a recorded chain of transmission, instead of arising from an amorphous mass of pious tradition as so many of the stories of the conversion period itself do.[27]

As will be seen, pursuing this line of enquiry further into such narratives unearths a productive seam of material about beliefs connected to the landscape. One of the stories that Hutton refers to is examined in chapters 3 and 4, an incident in which the common folk jeered at a group of monks who were having difficulty at sea.[28]

By way of an introductory example, such a methodology can be used to interrogate Bede's apologetic comments about the river baptisms conducted by St Paulinus (d. 644), the first bishop of York, in the river Glen at Yeavering, Northumberland, and then the river Swale at Catterick, North Yorkshire:

> Haec quidem in prouincia Berniciorum. Sed et in prouincia Deirorum, ubi saepius manere cum rege solebat, baptizabat in fluuio Sualua, qui uicum Cataractam

[26] John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Volume 5* (Yale University Press, 2016). p 12-14.
[27] Hutton (2014), p 317.
[28] *VCP* ch. 3 and *VCM* ll. 99–104.

> praeterfluit; nondum enim oratoria uel baptisteria in ipso exordio nascentis ibi ecclesiae poterant aedificari.
>
> All this happened in the kingdom of Bernicia; but also in the kingdom of Deira where he used to stay very frequently with the king, he baptized in the river Swale which flows beside the town of Catterick. For they were not yet able to build chapels or baptisteries there in the earliest days of the church.[29]

Bede clearly considers river baptism to be an improvised arrangement, which he excuses by claiming that the church had not been able to build any *oratoria uel baptisteria* at this early stage in its development.[30] It is clear from his account and his embarrassment over it that the practice of river baptism can be taken as historically plausible. It also draws attention to a related matter: why was Bede embarrassed about the use of rivers for baptism? This topic will be considered in further detail.

There are also within the limited number of surviving texts a few cases where one writer has reworked a previous author's description of an event, which further offers an insight into which details might have been considered awkward, inappropriate or a source of disagreement. In one particularly revealing discovery presented in this thesis, three different authors based in Britain have reworked an account of eastern monasticism contained in Sulpicius Severus' first book of *Dialogues*, each iteration providing a remarkable insight into the ways in which each author regarded the spiritual significance of the natural world, and also revealing something of their attitudes towards previous authors' interpretations.

This is an innovative methodology to apply to the early church in Britain, and it seems highly relevant to a society that is undergoing a managed transformation of many of its

[29] *HE* II.14 p 188-9.
[30] John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p 70 comments that Bede is overstating the church's later development: "this is the last as well as the first reference to *baptisteria* as a generic category in Anglo-Saxon England."

cultural and religious practices and beliefs, such changes inevitably provoking resistance and hostility to Christianity at times.

2.4 Bodily enactment in a physical landscape

The final methodological approach is relatively untried in the field of early medieval studies, an attempt to consider the written descriptions of ritual behaviour in terms of the physical experience of the participants. This experience is of particular relevance to a research project on nature interactions, which attempts to reconstruct ritual actions as physical immersions in the natural world in order to fully contextualise their expressions of belief. The early Christians in Britain were confronted with a physical as much as a moral and cultural landscape on which to mould their missionary message, a scene which included the bodies of their potential converts and their local environments.

Compared with other research that interrogates this period, the focus on the embodiment of conversion will balance the preponderance of conceptual language used by scholars who regard hagiographical records of nature interaction as literary devices or as expressions of purely moral, allegorical or theological ideas. As such it can be seen as an extension of the trajectory in Peter Turner's work on hermeneutics, another way of respecting the hagiographical author's claims of authenticity. If hagiography is meant to be copied, then it needs to be understood in a performed sense as well as in an intellectual sense. The hagiographers themselves were explicit that they saw their texts as paradigms to be emulated. The anonymous author of the *Vita Gregorii Magni*, composed at Whitby between 704 and 714,[31] goes so far as to justify the attribution of miracles by a different saint to pope Gregory on the basis that all saints can ultimately be considered to share common purpose and practice:

[31] Bertram Colgrave (ed.), *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p 48.

> Sed neque et illud moveat quemquam si quid horum de alio quolibet sanctorum fuisset effectum, cum sanctus apostolus per mysterium unius corporis membrorum, sanctorum scilicet vitam conparando concordat ut simus ad invicem alter alterius membra.
>
> So let no one be disturbed even if these miracles were performed by any other of the saints, since the holy Apostle, through the mystery of the limbs of a single body, which he compares to the living experience of the saints, concludes that we are all "members of one another."[32]

These activities have a collective authenticity, since they are actions that all holy people can be considered to share. This research therefore considers the descriptions of bathing rituals performed in nature as not only genuine attempts to record historical events but also as a potential rubric for the readers to consider and understand their own performance of similar rituals, including their own baptisms. To a modern mind, standing in the sea to pray perhaps appears sufficiently detached from authentic Christian practice to be unworthy of serious consideration. But if one tries to recreate the rituals as described in the different texts, a very different picture starts to emerge.

Theologians have noted the central role that the body takes in expressions of devotion by Christians in the Celtic tradition, opening up a line of enquiry that has prompted some scholarly speculation about ascetic ritual. Oliver Davies has written of the body as a vehicle through which an individual could gain spiritual glory:

> Running through a number of texts is the awareness of the body as the focus of human existence, not subordinate to the mind in a tortuous relation of subjection and culpability, but thematized as the locus of penance, where penance itself is not self-inflicted mutilation but the reception of new life and the beginning of the transformation that leads to glory.[33]

At least one scholar has been intrigued by the implications of such an embodied spiritual life in a way that directly relates to the research presented below, arguing that Celtic Christian descriptions of nakedness could in fact be read literally in terms of devotional bathing:

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[32] *VGM* ch. 30, p 130-1.
[33] Oliver Davies, *Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p 24.

> literal nakedness actually was a part of the Irish monastic asceticism particularly when, in a spirit of penance and in consultation with his soul-friend, the monk submerged himself up to his neck in frozen water. This was not merely subduing the body, for in Irish theology the body was the vehicle through which one attained glory, and these injunctions were experienced as the beginning of such a transformation.[34]

Thom's speculative comment about the physicality of devotional bathing, a subject she does not explore further, comes remarkably close to some of the details revealed by this study into the performance of such a ritual. Whatever the state of dress required, it is clear that the body was an intense source of both anxiety and resolution concerning human relationships with the natural world, interactions that were significant on both a spiritual and a physical level.

Such a combination of methodologies outlined here provides the tools for a systematic re-evaluation of the period in question from a number of perspectives. Scholarship on Celtic Christianity has been particularly susceptible to one-dimensional interpretation, and it is only by gathering as much insight from as many angles as possible that conclusions can be cross-checked to see what sort of cultural and intellectual milieu is being revealed. This study has been designed in appreciation of the full complexity of a period of mass cultural and religious change, acknowledging the challenges of a written record that is mostly but not entirely attempting to present a simplified vision of harmonious transition.

One final point arises in relation to the genre of historical and theological academic enquiry. This thesis finds an emphasis in the primary sources on bodily aspects of human existence that might seem overly mundane in the context of scholarly research: rituals of foot washing, inhibitions and prohibitions about natural water and even dress

[34] Catherine Thom, 'The Ascetical Theology and Praxis of Sixth to Eighth Century Irish Monasticism as a Radical Response to the Evangelium' (Australian Catholic University, Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2002), p 111, though she assigns the citation to Thomas O'Loughlin, who contributed separately.

codes for bathing. Yet even in the modern age religious differences and supposed divisions within Europe find their most acute popular expression in terms far removed from theological and philosophical deliberations, a focus on the different dress codes adopted by some Muslim women making headlines on a daily basis and even attracting new legislation in certain countries. The inculturation of religion is most acutely felt at such a level.

2.5 Literature review

Progress in understanding how and why early Christians gave so much attention to the natural world depends on how the limited number of primary sources are read, on the methodologies that help to recover the significant connections and associations that were attached to outdoor ritual activity. As will be described in this section, a few scholars have turned their attention to the specific topic of nature interactions, and after brief introduction here their texts will be cited throughout this thesis.

There is also a wider field of relevant scholarship, which relates to the conversion era itself as a period of cultural upheaval and change. As will be seen, the methods and conclusions inherited from previous scholarship have considerable limitations when it comes to the work of missionaries, because many scholars take at face value claims that conversion in Europe was a negotiated transition, where decisions were effectively taken at the most elite levels of society. Several scholars have suggested syncretic connections between nature interaction and the lingering influence of pagan beliefs, which pays some respect to the transitional nature of this historical period, but such connections surely require a deeper understanding of the overall context of conversion and why the Christian record is so keen to promote them.

Modern scholarship has recently started to address the specific issue of ritual interaction with the natural world, and the recent thesis by Britton Brooks offers valuable insights

into the literary construction of hagiographies with regard to the interplay between saints and creation. Brooks himself notes the tendency of modern scholars such as Dominic Alexander[35] to read interactions with the natural world allegorically, and more than other authors is assiduous in keeping a focus on the actual landscapes in which such activities took place. Brooks stresses the wider significance of the monastic milieu in which the early hagiographies in Britain were written and received, building on interpretations that read saintly interactions tropologically, as moral lessons intended to inculcate the need for obedience.[36] He goes further still, to acknowledge that the monastic hierarchy was itself intended to function as a model for the wider world, although mostly frames this as a lesson for monastic readers.[37] One of his other conclusions is that the hagiographies were establishing physical locations in order to promote pilgrimage, which is an innovative solution that maintains a focus on the actual landscapes.[38] It is a theory that would benefit from historical evidence that an infrastructure for pilgrimage was being established at such an early date. Even so, it comes close in a parallel way to the conclusions of this research that the focus on nature was intended to capture the imagination and devotional attention of the wider population.

Susan Crane's study *Animal Encounters* offers a reading that also pushes the significance of animal interactions beyond the confines of the monastic community to emphasise the close connection that once existed between humans and the rest of creation, citing the 'dark ecology' theory of Timothy Morton and highlighting the

[35] Dominic Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008).
[36] Brooks (2016) *passim* but especially at pp 13-14, 22-27, 67-73, 197-201.
[37] *Ibid*. p 23, 73.
[38] *Ibid*. p 56-7.

entanglement of humans with their environment.[39] Once again the vector of such argument is to focus on the physical world, but neither Crane nor Brooks develop this line to its fullest expression in the immediate context of the saints, their communities and their hagiographers.

The outreach of missionaries to the natural world needs to be set alongside their interaction with potential human converts, the message of harmonious communion with animals and the elements a compelling model for lay folk to contemplate. There is a significant problem with existing scholarship at this point in the attempt to investigate early Christianity, which is the near universal belief that there was effectively no process of missionary work to the mass laity worthy of the name. This literature review therefore turns to the current state of scholarship regarding the missionary theology and strategies of the early church in Britain in order to understand the preconceptions that scholars bring when considering popular expressions of belief during the conversion era. Indeed to many scholars the process of mass evangelisation scarcely exists at all as a phenomenon worth contemplating, either in Britain or even in the wider European missionary field:

> These conversions sponsored by missionaries from Ninian through Patrick and Augustine far into central Europe were not conversions in the sense often demanded by evangelists in the twenty-first century, accepting Christ as a personal Saviour in a great individual spiritual turnaround... At the time, those who described the experience normally used more passive and more collective language than the word 'conversion': a people or a community 'accepted' of 'submitted to' the Christian God and his representatives on earth... Mass rallies were not their [ie Christian missionaries'] style; most evangelists were what we would call gentry or nobility, and they normally went straight to the top when preaching the faith.[40]

[39] Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p 39.
[40] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p 342-3.

The notion that wholesale religious change could be introduced at the word of a leader without any significant negotiation or managed process to facilitate the ensuing intellectual and cultural upheaval does not truly resemble the reality of religious belief. The methodology using the criterion of embarrassment to discern popular resentment towards Christianity has not previously been employed to interrogate this issue in a British context, and it seems worth trying in a field where the current state of scholarship seems to be based on arguments from textual silence.

Barbara Yorke has examined the interface between Christianity and pre-Christian religion, and frames her discussion with an interesting statement on differences between the two religions, perhaps shedding more light on her own methodology than it does on the period in question. Finding a common language with which to compare the two 'religions' of Christianity and paganism is fraught with conceptual pitfalls. As a minor point, reservation can be expressed over Yorke's use of the term 'supernatural' to describe aspects of religious belief that could not be assimilated into Christianity, a concept that does not fit into the cosmology of early medieval European thinking.[41]

On more theologically traditional ground, however, is her use of Arthur Nock's distinction between 'natural' and 'prophetic' religions to consider the transition of beliefs, presented in his seminal book *Conversion*, published in 1933. This distinction presupposes a sharply delineated dualism:

> 'Natural religion' can be characterised as the desire to control natural forces and processes, and was the form of religion that was characteristic of the prehistoric peoples of Europe... In prophetic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity or Islam, the focus is quite different because the emphasis is on achieving salvation for an individual's inner soul through faith and appropriate behaviour... It would therefore be misleading to try to evaluate the earlier pre-Christian religion by contrasting it directly with Christianity for they were not the same type of

[41] Yorke (2016), p 100, although Yorke is following the influential arguments of Valerie Flint (1991).

> religion and did not operate in the same way. Nevertheless that is what many early medieval Christian writers, such as Bede, tended to do[42]

It is debatable whether such a clear-cut distinction can be drawn between Christianity and other religions, and highly debatable whether such a distinction, even if valid elsewhere, can be applied indiscriminately to the Christianity that emerges from the records of early medieval Britain. As chapter 3 will explore, it is in the natural world of early medieval Britain where human devotional activity is revealed in eschatological fulfilment. A restored creation can be glimpsed in the landscape as well as in liturgy, in the behaviour of the elements and animals in parallel to the morally reformed behaviour of people. It is also dubious to claim that Christianity can be entirely separated from 'natural' religion as cleanly as modern scholars might wish, the over-familiarity of parables such as 'the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed' obscuring the potential of a sacramental religion to infuse the material world with spiritual significance and agency.[43]

Yorke does an admirable job of collating numerous cultic expressions of belief during the conversion era to find continuity of symbolism and craft, such as animal motifs and their connection to the warrior cult of the period.[44] She also acknowledges evidence that Christianity might have been acquired by Anglo-Saxon settlers through cultural assimilation with native British Christians, but describes such an organic process as "a difficult one to substantiate".[45] And more than other historians she acknowledges the faint suggestions in Bede's accounts that there was a degree of teaching directed towards the common folk once missionaries had royal permission. Yorke considers the early medieval hagiographies studied by this thesis in a relatively brief, self-contained

[42] *Ibid.* p 100-1.
[43] Matthew 13:31.
[44] Yorke (2006), p 107-9.
[45] *Ibid*. p 120.

section as texts that focus on monastic concerns,[46] indicating perhaps a preference for historical rather than theological enquiry into the process of conversion itself. Therefore although her understanding of missionary theology seems limited, Yorke's overall conclusion that royal involvement was essential in enabling the conversion but not the end of the story is surely correct, her open-ended questions identifying the more obscure aspects of the conversion process that are the subject of chapter 4:

> The foundation of monasteries, pilgrimage to Rome and even abdication to live a religious life are all testimony to an enthusiasm for the new religion among the recently converted royal houses. But was this enthusiasm shared among their subjects, and did the type of assimilation recommended by Pope Gregory lead to a confusion of Christian and pre-Christian practices rather than a complete replacement of one by the other?[47]

Other scholars have questioned the suitability of sharp distinctions between 'primitive' and 'world' religions as proposed by Nock. Nicholas Higham (1997) all but rejects the model:

> Numerous studies have revealed a multitude of different, comparatively localised religions, each with complexities such that they defy categorisation as 'primitive'... To leap forward to the present for the moment, many social anthropologists now acknowledge that the distinction between 'world' and 'traditional' religions is a construct of Western domination of the intellectual process, and the premises and assumptions on which that has been based. As such, the contrast has no independent validity or value as a tool for the analysis of different religions and their interactions, the only useful distinction in this context being between Christian and non-Christian.[48]

Higham grapples with the notion of what 'conversion' would mean for an individual in 6th and 7th century England, and points out the problems inherent in any such exercise,

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[46] *Ibid*. p 188-196, especially: "It may be, as Catherine Cubitt has argued, that saint's cults operated on different levels, and that the written *Lives* reflect primarily the interests of the monastic audiences for which they were intended while other focuses were developed for ordinary lay people that were more in keeping with their interests and traditional places of worship." at p 195, citing Catherine Cubitt, 'Sites and sanctity: revisiting the cults of murdered and martyred kings', *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (2000), pp 53-83.

[47] Yorke (2016), p 135-6.

[48] Nicholas J. Higham, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p 13-14.

particularly in a period "desperately short of facts".[49] To consider conversion as either an individual, psychological transformation or the external adherence to a new set of public customs and practices depends greatly on the value judgement of the observer.[50] The evidence of Christian writers such as Bede indicates that missionaries believed the most important step was to encourage people to be baptised. Higham's perceptive focus on the urgency attaching to this ritual might appear to reflect the arguments developed in the second half of this thesis, that the missionary process relied greatly on the successful inculturation of baptismal practice and theology through devotional bathing rituals. Surprisingly Higham concludes that the baptismal ritual might "not have carried much religious meaning at all" to its subjects,[51] and ultimately decides in favour of a top-down and mostly political impulse for conversion:

> In a sense, therefore, Christianity was adopted in England because systems of authority and organisation which were inherent within it offered attractive solutions to political problems confronting powerful kings and 'overkings'. It was not primarily the intellectual or spiritual message which attracted such kings – indeed none can be shown to have grasped such messages in any sense meaningful to a Christian.[52]

In claiming this, Higham has to ignore the evidence that Yorke presents of numerous devout royal converts who abdicated to become monks: before the year 710, five Anglo-Saxon kings abdicated in order to enter monasteries, while Cadwalla of Wessex renounced the throne in 688 to go on pilgrimage to Rome for his baptism.[53]

John Blair mostly follows the model of a top-down conversion process, but gives due regard to the process of cultural assimilation that must have accompanied the conversion of Anglo-Saxon people living alongside Britons who were already Christian.

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[49] *Ibid*. p 9.
[50] *Ibid*. p 14-16.
[51] *Ibid*. p 18.
[52] *Ibid*. p 27.
[53] Yorke (2006), p 165-6, although she does speculate that there may have been political expediency in some of these abdications.

In particular he does not go so far as to say there were no major missionary campaigns aimed at the bulk of the laity, and acknowledges Bede's hand in shaping our understanding of the conversion process:

> While our written sources (notably Bede) may over-stress the reception of specific missionaries by specific great kings, it remains essentially true that organized Christianization proceeded from the top downwards, via courts to wider kindreds and dependants.[54]

There is support for the more moderate assertions cited above if one takes Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* at face value, but the evidence from hagiographies, as well as traces left between the lines of Bede's major work, indicates that missionaries were just as preoccupied with rustics as they were with royalty. It is even possible that they found the former a harder audience for Christianity than monarchs, and may have fallen back on some rather opportunistic tactics. One only needs to look at the material about St Martin written by Sulpicius Severus to understand the levels of engagement that a missionary bishop needed to undertake in a pagan society.[55] In comparable manner, St Patrick describes his duty to be one of Jesus' "fishers of men" and is greatly preoccupied with the internal transformation of Christianity.[56]

Another writer has directly addressed the issue of missionary theology in early medieval Britain from a viewpoint more sympathetic to the Christian tradition. Douglas Dales offers a comprehensive survey of the infrastructure of missionary work, the individual learning and endeavour of missionaries and the networks of monastic foundations across Europe that helped to sustain the missions. It paints a vivid picture of a recognisably catholic missionary force, but does not greatly interrogate the interface of

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[54] Blair (2005), p 49.
[55] For example, Martin mistakenly interrupts a rural funeral procession in the belief that it was a pagan ritual, in ch. 12 of his *vita*, and has to counter strong local resistance when he chops down a sacred tree in ch. 13; in the *Dialogi* Martin is surrounded by a throng of Pagans on a journey to Chartres and stops to preach to them, *Dialogi* II.4.
[56] Patrick: *Confessio*, ch. 40.

Christian teaching with pagan culture. For example he describes some of Columba's many nature miracles as "folkloric" but in the following sentence describes others as revealing the "pastoral and evangelistic side to Columba's ministry".[57] As this thesis argues, these two categories might not be so easily distinguishable.

Ronald Hutton, in *Pagan Britain*, is one of the few leading historians who believes that the top-down process of conversion is too limited as an explanation for the Christianization of tribes, but concludes that the evidence for alternative models is lacking:

> individual choices and spiritual convictions must have counted, otherwise it is difficult to explain why some people entered monasteries and some did not, and some apostatized from Christianity in changing times and others did not. The real problem is, as indicated above, that the sources available for the early medieval British Isles are not good enough for us to be able to portray any models of conversion experience in action. We can presume that all or most of them operated, without being able to demonstrate this in detail.[58]

As will be presented in this thesis, a methodology which pays careful regard to the scant traces of criticism of Christianity recorded during the conversion era produces some unexpected insights into the negotiations between Christian and pagan. On repeated occasions missionaries appear to hold out the promise of a new and improved relationship with the natural world to common folk who were sceptical of Christian moralising.

[57] Douglas Dales, *Light to the Isles: Missionary Theology in Celtic and Anglo Saxon Britain* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1997), p 64.
[58] Hutton (2014), p 330.

CHAPTER 3

Early medieval concepts of nature

This chapter considers a word used in the title of this thesis, an investigation of the term 'nature' both as a conceptual category and in the context of early medieval understanding of humans and their relationship to the environment. This is followed by a brief attempt to clarify some of the assumptions that are used to delineate ethnic groups that comprise early medieval Britain, particularly the dualistic division between 'Celtic' and Anglo-Saxon peoples.

This investigation begins with the earliest indigenous description of popular belief, recorded by the monk St Gildas, in which it is clear that the natural environment takes centre stage.

3.1 *De excidio*: the earliest indigenous description of popular belief

Gildas' *De excidio* was written deep within the formational stage of the conversion era, between the years 450 and 550, with modern scholarship tending to prefer the later end of this timeframe.[59] This text includes a single, brief reference to the conflict between pagan and Christian beliefs in Britain. Given the paucity of literary evidence about missionary engagement in Britain before the separate expeditions of Columba and Augustine of Canterbury, this brief narrative reference merits careful consideration.

> nec enumerans patriae portenta ipsa diabolica paene numero Aegyptiaca vincentia, quorum nonnulla liniamentis adhuc deformibus intra vel extra deserta moenia solito more rigentia torvis vultibus intuemur, neque nominatim inclamitans montes ipsos aut colles vel fluvios olim exitiabiles, nunc vero humanis usibus utiles, quibus divinus honor a caeco tunc populo cumulabatur
>
> I shall not enumerate the devilish monstrosities of my land, numerous almost as those that plagued Egypt, some of which we can see today, stark as ever, inside or outside city walls: outlines still ugly, faces still grim. I shall not name the

[59] Hutton (2014), p 285; Yorke (2006), p 15-6 argues persuasively for a date towards the end of this range.

> mountains and hills and rivers, once so pernicious, now useful for human needs, on which, in those days, a blind people heaped divine honours.[60]

The centrality of the natural environment in the transition of beliefs during the conversion era is unmistakable, and this brief passage merits sensitive appraisal in its choice of words to describe the overlay of religious concepts on the landscape. Though it may seem counter-intuitive to a modern observer, Gildas' text appears to suggest that pre-Christian religion was to some extent formed around the notion that elements of this landscape were seen as physically harmful. Winterbottom's translation of the word *exitiabiles* as 'pernicious' rather than 'deadly' or 'destructive' is perhaps an attempt to avoid the implication that the pre-Christian people of Britain held such negative attitudes. However it is clear that Gildas is not simply writing allegorically about pagan beliefs by implying that they were immoral and thus brought about spiritual death and destruction, for which a construction using the word *mors* would be expected after biblical precedent.[61] His use of the word *exitiabiles* is instead a powerful indication that the land itself was seen as an actively hostile agent in a physical sense, and could be more literally translated as follows:

> I shall not be calling out in detail those mountains or hills or rivers, once so deadly, now so useful for human needs, on which in those days a divine honour was once heaped by a blind people.

Whatever the translation, it remains clear that the conflict between the old and new beliefs is articulated largely in terms of the landscape, this rare glimpse into the period suggesting that there was a relationship with the natural environment that experienced a Christian transformation. Gildas is recording the conversion of popular belief from pre-Christian to Christian concepts, and it is calibrated by the conversion of the natural world from baneful to benign significance.

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[60] Gildas: *De excidio* 4.2-3 (in *The Ruin of Britain, and Other Works*, ed. by Michael Winterbottom (Chichester: Phillimore & Co., 1978), Latin p 90; translation p 17).
[61] *passim*, including *mortiferum* in Mark 16:18, and *mortificamur* Romans 8:36.

Three elements of this landscape are mentioned: mountains, hills and rivers. This thesis does not greatly interrogate the first two types of landmark, but it does make a particularly careful study of the role and use of natural bodies of water in the missionary spread of Christianity. There are many points of contact between this brief reference by Gildas and the following research, the notion that the landscape was converted from 'deadly' to *utiles*, 'useful', worth presenting early on as an indication of some of terms in which missionary interaction with the environment is articulated.

There are very few direct records of pagan beliefs to be found in any of the early Christian literature from Britain, but Gildas offers a sweeping narrative vista of the conversion process that proves compatible with the findings of this research that there was a marked negative superstition about certain aspects of the landscape. It is clear that this arena can best be described in modern terms as part of the natural environment, as part of nature. As a subject of negotiation during conversion, it can be differentiated from missionary engagement with, for example, the built environment in the form of pagan buildings and shrines, a separate dimension that Gildas himself mentions, or with philosophical concepts such as morality and the afterlife.

3.2 Application of the term 'nature' in early medieval Britain

Despite the focus on the spiritual significance of the natural landscape in Gildas, it would be misleading to assume that the word 'nature' in its modern sense can be applied without further consideration to the religious milieu of early medieval Britain.

The first word of the title of this thesis still presents a challenge, since the concepts of 'nature' and the 'natural world' as a modern writer would understand them can not be used to recreate an understanding of the cosmos and humans place in it during the period under investigation. The term today is typically defined in terms of an opposite to human culture and built environments, and nature itself is considered to be a system

governed by its own laws. Neither of these constructs apply to the period under investigation: both 'nature' and humans were considered collectively by Christian writers as a sort of divine artifice, as *creato*, creation, all of which was subject to the same divine laws.

There is no explicit definition about what 'nature' as a category might mean in early medieval writing, or even how or whether it was considered a category at all, to be defined in terms of its opposition to other phenomena such as human culture, or indeed a concept such as 'the supernatural'. Richard Jones (2013) is one of many recent writers expressing this point of view, his language somewhat forceful in suggesting such oppositions might be 'false':

> From the outset we must be clear that what might now be labelled the 'natural world' had no currency for Classical or medieval scholars. The phrase is never encountered because, as either a physical entity or a mental construct, its existence was simply not acknowledged. Modern western society has no problem with the idea because it has found a philosophical rationale for separating it from us, nature from culture. But this division, false or otherwise, has a relatively short historical pedigree and enjoyed little or no validity before the seventeenth century.[62]

It is certainly true that the word *natura* as a reference to 'nature' meaning the natural world is not in common currency in the early medieval literature. Bede mostly uses *natura* to refer to a human's innate psychological or physical properties, as in the emperor Severus being 'harsh by nature' *natura saeuus*.[63] In a survey of 22 instances of the word and its cognate *naturalis* in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, only two are used to describe something non-human. In the first Cuthbert asks his brethren to bring some barley to Inner Farne, in case the 'nature of the soil' (*natura soli*) should only be suitable for that crop.[64] In the second it is used to describe the site of Jesus' birthplace: 'In its [the plateau's] eastern corner is a kind of natural half-cave', (*in cuius orientali angulo quasi*

[62] Richard Jones, *The Medieval Natural World* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2013), p. 3.
[63] *HE* I.5, p 24-5.
[64] *HE* IV.28, p 436-7.

quoddam naturale semiantrum est).[65] This solitary example demonstrates that it could be used to describe a landscape feature, adjectivally at least.

Other scholars have stressed the lack of a conceptual boundary between humans and the natural world. Susan Crane, a scholar who has recently studied this topic, emphasises the value of theories and interpretations that blur distinctions between society and nature:

> In presenting a natural world so continuous with human society, Irish hagiography's hierarchy of species looks less than vertical, tilting over toward horizontality. Its animals make its humans look less uniquely social, less unique among animals, more entangled in their environments. Here it seems the Lives of Cuthbert and Columba resonate faintly across the ages with the environmental thought of Timothy Morton, Katherine Hayles, or Ursula Heise. These and other post-humanist interpreters urge that societies and natures, human and other animals, are intricately enmeshed in dynamic environments stretching outward and upward beyond our ken.[66]

It is certainly true that many modern commentators describe 'Celtic' Christians as living closer to the natural world than we do in modernity.[67] Yet there is still a conceptual error in attempting to use this categorisation in terms of the early medieval imagination, since referring to its absence is not the same as positing an alternative model. A number of highly significant points arise from this cosmological understanding of humanity's place in a connected creation. For example such an undifferentiated scheme calls into question such matters as the nature of miracles and the existence of what a modern historian and theologian might call the 'supernatural'.[68] Bede does not use the term

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[65] *HE* V.16 p 508-9 and n. 2. Bede here claims to cite Adomnán's text of *De locis sanctis*, but as Colgrave & Mynors point out he is actually using his own abridged version of *DLS*.

[66] Crane (2012), p 39.

[67] See for example: McGrath (2003), p 34; examples of this tendency are compiled and analysed by Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p 75, 194, 196, 223; see also *New Directions in Celtic Studies: An Essay in Social Criticism*, ed. by Amy Hale and Philip Payton (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2000), p 224-5.

[68] For example John Blair (2005) is usually careful with the use of conceptual language, but uses the term 'supernatural' uncritically to describe pagan/Christian crossover landmarks (pp 176, 184, 218) and purely Christian sites (p 476). Another significant

'supernatural'. The closest he comes is when he describes God's action in coming down to earth to see the Tower of Babel as *praeter usitatum naturae cursum*, 'outside the usual course of nature'.[69] While a modern commentator might consider the demons, monsters and even the overtly friendly animals encountered in this research to be in a category outside the normal, observable rules of the natural world, there is no such discontinuity to be found in the texts themselves, as will be seen in the examples studied.

Britton Brooks' recent thesis appears to avoid the complications of employing the term 'nature' to describe the animals and elements with which the early saints interacted, and instead uses the capitalised term Creation.[70] In many ways this seems a wise precaution that circumvents modern categories, employing the same language that Bede and others use to refer to the entirety of physical and spiritual phenomena in which humans form an important but undifferentiated part. Yet it was not the entirety of creation towards which these innovative, outdoor rituals were aimed, but rather at specific features in the landscape and seascape that were decidedly non-human: animals, bodies of water, wilderness, groves, islands, and fenland. And indeed Brooks himself refines his use of the term Creation accordingly:

> I will use the term Creation (capitalized) to refer to the physical natural world that was created during the Genesis narrative (i.e. elemental Creation: wind, water, fire, etc.; and animate Creation: deer, snakes, wild beasts, etc.).[71]

Brooks is entirely correct that these are the objects towards which saintly devotions and interactions are directed, but all of these phenomena are of course a subset of the

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example is Valerie Flint (1991), whose book offers brilliant insight into the uses of magic in both Christian and non-Christian contexts but does so by liberally employing the term 'supernatural'.

[69] Bede: *In Gen*. book 3, in *Bedae Venerabilis opera. Pars 2, Opera exegetica*, ed. C. W. Jones (Turnholt, 1967), *CCSL* 118A, p154, translation from *On Genesis*, ed. by Calvin Kendall (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), p 229.

[70] Brooks (2016), *passim*.

[71] *Ibid.* p 1, n. 1.

entirety of creation, and could also reasonably be referred to as 'nature' in the modern sense of the word. To examine this from another perspective, ritual interaction with human structures and landscape configurations is all but absent from the hagiographical record of missionary activity in the early British church, Gildas' brief reference and the mound and buried cistern in which Guthlac lives in the Fens the most notable exceptions.[72] Hermits and missionaries alike seek out places during the conversion era which have not been shaped by human activity, a focus on the specifically non-human aspects of creation.

There does therefore appear to be a conceptual category in which certain aspects of creation are aggregated into an overall domain in which saintly power was demonstrated. The terms 'nature' and 'natural world' might be regarded as anachronistic, but their use is convenient and has a measure of precedent as a conceptual category, as will be developed further.

3.3 Bede's theological formula regarding interaction with nature

One passage in Bede's hagiographical writing stands out as an explicit acknowledgement that there was a collective body of saintly interactions with non-human aspects of creation used to illuminate a significant dimension of Christianity. It appears in his prose *Vita sancti Cuthberti*, where he explains why the saint should be able to cause nature to behave in seemingly unusual ways, referencing five incidents in the saint's life: birds obeying his command to stop taking thatch from his hermitage, two otters drying his feet after he bathed in the sea, the waves depositing a length of timber that he needed, and two separate changes in wind direction, one of which brings some

[72] *VSG* ch. 28; Bede's record of the repurposing of pagan sites of worship has been cited in chapter 1.

monks on a raft safely back to shore, and the other of which prevents a house being burned down:

> Non sola autem aeris sed et maris animalia, immo et ipsum mare sicut et aer et ignis iuxta quod in superioribus exposuimus, uiro uenerabili praebuere obsequium. Qui enim auctori omnium creaturarum fideliter et integro corde famulatur, non est mirandum si eius imperiis ac uotis omnis creatura deseruiat. At nos plerunque iccirco subiectae nobis creaturae dominium perdimus, quia Domino et creatori omnium ipsi seruire negligimus.
>
> Moreover not only the creatures of the air but also of the sea, yes, and even the sea itself, as well as air and fire as we have shown above, did honour the venerable man. For if a man faithfully and wholeheartedly serves the maker of all created things, it is no wonder though all creation should minister to his commands and wishes. But for the most part we lose dominion over the creation which was made subject to us, because we ourselves neglect to serve the Lord and Creator of all things.[73]

This passage merits detailed consideration in terms of the concept of 'nature' as a discrete physical realm in which spiritual power could operate. The first point to note is that there does indeed appear to be no place for any concept of the 'supernatural'. Rather than there being a distinction between any laws of nature and the workings of God, the two are not separated into different categories, but remain on a continuum: *plerunque*, 'for the most part', creatures behave in one way, but not always. Bede believes that the remarkable behaviour that animals and the elements display in the presence of a saint reveals something that is inherent, if latent, within the natural world. All of animate and inanimate creation alike bears the imprint of God's purpose. If one were to engage in systematic study of the natural laws according to the model proposed by Bede, one would end up ultimately revealing the original divine purpose as implanted in nature from the beginning. Bede amplifies this in his separate, exegetical text *In Genesim* as 'the first creation', where he also alludes to Cuthbert's interaction with birds:

> Nec quaesitu dignum est quare non etiam nunc cunctis homo dominetur animantibus. Postquam enim ipse suo conditori subiectus esse noluit, perdidit dominium eorum quae suo conditor iuri subiecerat. Denique testimonium primae creationis legimus uiris sanctis atque humiliter Deo seruientibus et aues

[73] *VCP* ch. 21, p 224-5.

> obsequium praebuisse, et rictus cessisse bestiarum et uenenum nocere non potuisse serpentium.
>
> It is not proper to ask why man does not still rule over all living creatures, for after he would not submit himself to his Creator, he lost dominion over those whom the Creator had subjected to his jurisdiction. Finally, as evidence of the first creation, we read not only that birds have rendered obedience to saints humbly serving God, but also that they have been spared from the yawning jaws of wild beasts, and that the poison of serpents has been uable to harm them.[74]

This then is as clear a demonstration as one might hope to find of why any study of the 'book of nature' would not lead to an independent, self-contained system of laws and principles. Rather, it would lead one back to scripture, and ultimately to cosmogenic contemplation, contemplation about the origins of the universe. History, scripture and contemplation of the natural world all lead to Genesis, opening up a path back to the original configuration of nature in the Garden of Eden. The significance of this in terms of forging a Christian missionary narrative will become apparent in the research that follows.

It is thus important in ontological terms that Bede believes that human dominion over nature is a cause that has *already* been established. There is a pre-existing pattern that has already been created, a pattern that exists in creation, in the natural order of things, and which the saints are able to re-activate. The nature-shifting rituals and interactions of the saint in question do not require direct intervention by God, because there is a vehicle for them that already exists. This is an important point, because it bypasses the idea that there is a 'supernatural' agency at work in these incidents. Indeed Bede himself goes so far as to say that such behaviour by animals and the elements is 'no wonder' (*non est mirandum*). God is not creating new rules out of nothing, or intervening to break any natural laws, when the elements, birds and fire actively demonstrate

[74] Bede: *In Gen*. book 1, 1:28, *CCSL* 118A, p 29, trans. Kendall (2008), p 94.

obedience to Cuthbert's commands. Rather they are reverting to type. It is arguable that none of these interventions in the natural world were even considered to be miracles.

Before examining the theological suppositions on which Bede has built this formula, it is of primary importance to understand that the realm in which saints operate to reveal the divine pattern is a specific subset of creation: creatures living in the air and the sea, the sea itself, and the elements of air and fire. All of these could reasonably be categorised as natural phenomena, as 'nature' in the modern sense of the term. It is particularly interesting that Bede almost appears to surprise himself with the inclusion of the sea in his list of phenomena which can obey the holy man (*immo et ipsum mare sicut*, 'yes, and even the sea itself'). Brooks, citing other scholars, frames Bede's surprise in terms of Anglo-Saxon engagement with the sea as a vast and uncontrollable realm which is variously impassive or hostile towards humans.[75] As will be seen later in this research, Christian acknowledgement that water was not merely a vessel for creatures but was itself a creature with its own agency and potential for spiritual possession is a powerfully resonant Christian theology that can be traced to a patristic source in the shape of Ambrose of Milan.

Bede clearly writes from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, but he is also dealing with inherited tradition regarding Cuthbert, and Christian missionaries more generally, that place great emphasis on the display of Christian potency in ameliorating the behaviour of specific natural phenomena. As such, Bede's list of elements and animals bears comparison with the environment that Gildas presents in his vista of Christian conversion. In this context, the decision has been made to use the terms 'nature' and 'natural world' to describe the specific aspects of creation that appear to be targeted by missionary action during the conversion era.

[75] Brooks (2016), p 157-8.

The next point to consider is why Bede believes this divine pattern is for the most part obscured in the workings and behaviour of the natural world. An explanation is given in his own text:

> At nos plerunque iccirco subiectae nobis creaturae dominium perdimus, quia Domino et creatori omnium ipsi seruire negligimus.
>
> But for the most part we lose dominion over the creation which was made subject to us, because we ourselves neglect to serve the Lord and Creator of all things.[76]

It is clear that Bede's formula rests on the notion that human disobedience and sin create a disruption in the fabric of creation. The reference to humans receiving dominion over creation points directly to Genesis 1:26-9, a passage from the Bible that will appear again in other contexts in this research. The disharmony in creation between humans and the natural world occurs because of human failure from the Fall onwards.

This is an exegetical line that merits brief examination to determine its likely route of transmission to the early British church. Perhaps surprisingly given its emphasis on the lasting effects of the Fall, it is not possible to trace every aspect of this theological formula back to Augustine, since Bede's writings appear to reflect a somewhat broader cosmology than Augustine's rather narrow focus on original sin.

As might be expected, Augustine's extensive writings offer different and somewhat inconsistent perspectives on the effects of the Fall, divided by some scholars into two broad positions, an early, pessimistic view and a later, optimistic revision.[77] The two can be traced most clearly by studying his contrasting exegeses on Genesis 3:18, which describes the appearance of thorns following the Fall. His initial position was that all of creation was altered for the worse at the moment of the Fall:

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[76] *VCP* ch. 21, p 224-5.

[77] K. Pollmann 'Human Sin and Natural Environments: Augustine's Two Positions on Genesis 3:18', *Augustinian Studies* 41 (2010), pp 69-85; Reuling, Hanneke, *After Eden: Church Fathers and Rabbis on Genesis 3:16-21* (Brill, 2006) discusses the extent to which scholars argue for or against such a discontinuity in Augustine's writings, p 162-3.

> Ergo dicendum est, quod per peccatum hominis terra maledicta sit, ut spinas pareret[78]
>
> Therefore it should be said, that through the sin of man the earth was cursed, so as to bring forth thorns

In his later writings Augustine presented an entirely anthropocentric interpretation, arguing that creation itself was unaffected by the Fall and remained inherently good. What changed was the relationship between sinful, mortal humans and the natural world. Hanneke Reuling discerns this position in Augustine's reconsideration of the purpose of spiky plants in his *De Genesi ad litteram*, written between 401 and 415. In this second exegesis, Augustine focuses on the use of the word *tibi* in Genesis 3:18 when God describes the function of thorns, suggesting a repurposing of these plants rather than an alteration in the fabric of creation: *Spinas et tribulos pariet tibi*, 'It will bring forth thorns and spiny plants for you' (emphasis added). As Reuling writes:

> Augustine argues that thorns and thistles possibly grew on earth even before the first sin, as they may have been useful, especially as animal fodder. If this is so, the curse on the earth did not introduce these plants, but merely changed their purpose.[79]

Augustine's position on the inherent and unchanging goodness of creation represents an evolution of his thinking. Bede's theological formula in the *VCP* about humans losing dominion over creation could depend on either one of Augustine's positions, but if one turns to Bede's other text it is overwhelmingly clear that he considers the whole of creation was changed by the Fall. In his exegetical work on Genesis 3:18, Bede closely follows Augustine's earlier position when he argues for this universal corruption:

> Per peccatum enim hominis terra maledicta est, ut spinas pareret, non ut ipsa poenas sentiret quae sine sensu est, sed ut peccati humani crimen semper hominibus ante oculos poneret

[78] *Sancti Augustini opera: de genesi contra Manichaeos*, ed. by Dorothea Weber (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1998), p 85; the text was written in 389-90.
[79] Reuling (2006), p 196; p 187 for the dating of *De Genesi ad litteram*.

> For by the sin of man the earth was cursed, so that it gave birth to thorns, not in order that the earth itself, which is without sense, would feel the punishments, but so that it should put the crime of human sin always before men's eyes.[80]

Bede – and the earlier Augustine – are here following a tradition of patristic thought that proposed a notion of universal corruption, whereby human sin caused a change in the forms and behaviour of all creation, a cursing of the earth itself. As described above, Bede alludes to his theological formula in his exegesis on Genesis 1:28, which rests on the same notion of harmony lost at the Fall.

Bede's theology about universal corruption is more closely aligned with earlier patristic writers, most notably St Basil the Great, than it is with Augustine's later exegesis, which is an interesting counterbalance to the notion that it is Augustine who dominates and shapes early medieval understanding of the effects of the Fall. It was Basil who proposed that human disobedience precipitated the end of universal vegetarianism for both humans and animals, including lions and leopards, and that God's commandment to humans to start enjoying all types of foods in Genesis 9:3 was extended to the rest of creation.[81] Bede cite's Basil's *Hexameron* at least 16 times in his *In Genesim*, and repeats Basil's argument that there was no predation before the Fall, but universal vegetarianism:

> ne ipsae aues raptu infirmorum alitum uiuebant, nec lupus insidias explorabat ouilia circum... sed uniuersa concorditer herbis uirentibus ac fructibus uescebantur arborum.

[80] Bede: *In Gen*. book 1, 3:17-18, CCSL 118A, p 68; trans. p 135.
[81] Basil the Great: *On the Origin of Humanity*, Discourse 2, 6. In *On the Human Condition / St. Basil the Great*, trans. by Nonna V. Harrison (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), p 53. There are nine homilies in Basil's *Hexameron*, a series also known as *On the Six Days of Creation* that end before he discusses the creation of humans; the two discourses of *On the Origin of Humanity*, cited here, are thought by some scholars to be Basil's postscript written very late in his life or posthumously by a close associate of his: Harrison (2005), p 14.

> it is clear that those birds did not live by stealing the food of weaker animals, nor did the wolf search out and ambush around the sheepfold... but all things in harmony fed upon the green plants and fruits of the trees.[82]

Notably for the purposes of this research into northern European thought, Ambrose also followed Basil's exegetical thought on the cosmological changes wrought by human sin.[83] The contrast with Augustine's position is stark, as Karla Pollmann delineates with admirable clarity in an essay on the relationship between human sin and the natural environment:

> Ambrose, following and enlarging on the comments of Basil, said that before the Fall of the first human beings the rose blossomed without thorn, as an equivalent to the sinless state of the first humans. After the Fall, the thorns were added to the rose, as a mirror of the now deteriorated and more troubled state of *all* humankind. Nature serves as a reminder and teacher of the post-lapsarian state of human misery and of the harshness of reality. Thus, this biblical statement can also be allegorized, viz., that because of human guilt, the blossoming paradisiacal state was changed through the addition of thorns of the mind and thistles of the soul... This was not, however, the only way of handling Gen. 3:18. In fact, Augustine represents a remarkable deviation from what had become the "late antique" norm.[84]

Much more could be written about the legacy of patristic writings on the effects of the Fall and on the behaviour of creation in the presence of holy men and women, but for the purposes of this research it is clear that Bede was of the opinion that Adam and Eve's disobedience precipitated a universal corruption. Although not explicitly stated in a theological formula, the notion that non-human creation bears the marks of sin can be discerned in other early medieval writers too, most notably the anonymous monk of Lindisfarne who wrote the *VCA*, as will be seen. Certainly it would be difficult to reconcile Augustine's later view that creation remained inherently good with the perspective discerned consistently in all the British writers studied for this research that the natural world could act in ways that were capricious, hostile, sinful and deadly. For the purposes of this study, therefore, it seems Ambrose and not the later Augustine

[82] Bede: *In Gen.* book 1, 1:29-30, CCSL 118A, p 30; trans. p 94.
[83] Pollmann (2010), p 71.
[84] *Ibid*. p 72-3.

lends patristic authority to the impulse that creation can undergo some form of spiritual transformation and hence reconciliation to humans.

Bede's theological formula therefore gives a central place to the function and effects of sin in the human relationship with the natural world, and specifically the effect of the Fall on creating disharmony. The intense interactions with nature studied in this research are predicated on the notion that Adam and Eve's sin created a lasting legacy that later humans had to confront. The premise of nature interactions according to this formula therefore depends entirely on the notion of the Fall and on the linked notion that Christianity offers a means of reversing the Fall on a cosmological scale.

The first point to make about this theology of nature interactions is that its origins are far removed from one of the oft-cited sources for peculiarities in British and Irish Christianity, which is the influence of Pelagian theology. This is a striking contrast to numerous popular and a few academic writers who believe that a sympathetic relationship between Celtic Christianity and the natural world is one of the hallmarks of Pelagian theology. Karl Barth is sometimes cited in this regard, supposedly describing British Christianity as 'incurably Pelagian', although it has not been possible to trace this alleged citation back to his own writings.[85] Indeed it can be argued further that this intense recovery of the 'first creation' through saintly interactions was not simply non-Pelagian, but anti-Pelagian, a perspective that will appear again in this research.

The question arises, does this formula represent Bede's attempt to fit a popular expression of belief, a cultic attachment to the display of spiritual power in the natural world, into a Catholic theological system? Is it a *post hoc* rationalisation of St

[85] Ian Bradley (1999), p 199; Loren Wilkinson, 'Saving Celtic Christianity', *Christianity Today*, April 24, 2000; Robert Van de Weyer, *Celtic Fire* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), p 23-4 uses this supposed quotation from Barth to attribute the British love of gardening, landscape and pets to this early Celtic attitude towards nature.

Cuthbert's fame, as recorded in his earliest *vita* by the anonymous monk of Lindisfarne, or does it accurately represent a wider theological viewpoint that formed part of the development of this cult? There is evidence presented in chapter 5 that it was in fact rooted in an original expression of Christianity that was first composed by the anonymous monk. For all Bede's ability and authority as a theologian, it would appear that he was not merely adding a gloss to a wayward and potentially eccentric expression of faith, but accurately and explicitly recording what was a pre-existing impulse in the missionary drive. Certainly his formula reads not merely as an improvised justification for the inclusion of certain miracles in the *Life of St Cuthbert* but instead provides a hugely powerful and flexible way to interpret nearly all such nature-based interactions in what is known as Celtic Christianity. Even something as striking as Brigit's ability to change the course of a river in Cogitosus' *Vita* could be comfortably interpreted within Christian tradition as the way a holy person could remove literal and spiritual deviations from the norm in a landscape.[86]

As will be demonstrated in this research, Bede's seemingly innovative theological formula was a sympathetic attempt to articulate the indigenous expressions and rituals of such Celtic Christian figures as St Cuthbert. Certainly there must have been something in the formative years of British Christianity that made such a theology and practice of reconciliation with nature so significant, expressed and celebrated across the supposed divisions between Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Christianity.

3.4 Creatureliness: participants in a cosmological liturgy

According to the scheme outlined in this chapter, disharmony between humans and the natural world was predicated on human sin. Although it is Bede who makes this notion explicit with his theological formula, the same thinking can be discerned in many other

[86] Cogitosus: *Vita sanctae Brigitae* ch. VII (33).

early Christian writers, including the hagiographers of Britain and Ireland. But what is perhaps more pronounced still in an insular context is the notion that this disharmony was not only caused by human sin, but it could be resolved by human sanctity, and a prelapsarian order re-established between a saintly individual and the natural world.

There is therefore a point buried a little more deeply in this theology, that there exists in all of creation a mimetic chain of action and reaction: human disobedience has precipitated disobedience by nature, and can in turn resolve it. To understand quite why human sin and reconciliation should take on such seemingly cosmological significance, it is necessary to acknowledge that the concept of atonement held in the early church differs from later medieval formulations. Gustaf Aulén in his seminal work *Christus Victor*, first published in 1931,[87] describes how the concept of the atonement changed during the middle ages, evolving into the 'Satisfaction theory' that Christ had to suffer and die on the cross as a substitute for all other humans, a theology later nuanced into the concept of 'penal substitution' at the Reformation. The death of Christ in earlier conceptions was not however primarily focused on redeeming the individual's sinful behaviour or character, but rather more on releasing the whole of the cosmos from captivity by the devil. The focus is on creatures as victims, held in bondage, and Christ comes by way of a ransom payment to release all of creation. As James Kallas puts it:

> Now since this cosmos itself is in bondage, depressed under evil forces, the essential content of the word "salvation" is that the world itself will be rescued, or renewed, or set free. Salvation is a cosmic event affecting the whole creation. It is not simply the internal renewal of man's religious attitude. It is not a psychological openness to the future, or a heightened consciousness of God's presence. It is instead a rescue of the whole world. Salvation is not simply the overcoming of my rebellion and the forgiveness of my guilt, but salvation is the liberation of the whole world process of which I am only a small part.[88]

[87] Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1970).
[88] James G. Kallas, *The Satanward View: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p 74.

The early medieval understanding of atonement regarded the liberation of humans from captivity as a cosmological moment, not merely about human sins but about reconciliation of the universe with God. Humans were to play a pivotal role in leading this reconciliation, the main actors in the drama of all created beings in relationship to God, and in their wake the rest of creation would follow. Paul Blowers has traced the origins of this theology back to Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394) and sees echoes in Maximus the Confessor (d. 662):

> While neither Gregory of Nyssa nor Maximus deployed today's intentional language of "caring for creation" in a strongly ecological sense, the clear inference of their theological anthropology is that humanity's unique role in the world is still contextualized within the triune Creator's own *oikonomia*, or stewardship, of creation, of which free human agents are to be perennial imitators. All non-human creatures are invariably partnered with human beings in service to the Creator.[89]

There are therefore theological precedents for the saintly focus on the natural world that are the hallmark of the hagiographies studied in this research, and Blowers' observations could in turn be applied to Bede. Yet it is the articulation of this orientation towards nature that seems unusually pronounced in a British context, the translation of this theological matrix into actual ritual engagement with the non-human aspects of creation. In Bede's formula and in the many nature rituals it explains, we see the whole of creation line up in ordered manner, led by a human, in praise of God, a chain of mimetic worship that cascades through all manner of animate and inanimate creatures.

It is this research's argument that Bede's theological formula is not entirely shaped by direct patristic precedent, but is something that emerged in response to the unique situation in Britain. It certainly answers a question in Celtic Christianity that was apparent to some of those who practised it in earlier generations, such as that posed by Jonas in his *Vita Columbani* of *c*. 643:

[89] Blowers (2012) p 359.

> Cui sic bestiae ac volucres viri Dei parerent imperio? Nam Chagnoaldum Lugduno Cloade pontificem, qui eius et minister et discipulus postea fuit, cognovimus referentem, qui se testabatur sepe vidisse, cum in heremo vel ieiunio vel oratione vacans deambularet, esse sepe solitum feras, bestias ac aves arcessire, quae ad imperium eius statim veniebant, quas manu blandiens adtrectabat: ita fere avesque gaudentes ac ludentes laetitia uberi, velut catuli solent dominis adolare exultabant. Et ferusculam, quam vulgo homines exquirium vocant, sepe de arduis arborum culminibus arcessitum manuque receptum suoque collo inpositum sinuque ingredientem ac exeuntem sepe vidisse supradictus vir testabatur.[90]
>
> [To what authority in the man of God do the beats and the birds submit?][91]
>
> *And so did the beasts and the birds obey the power of the man of God.* I have this on the authority of Chagnoald, bishop of Laon, who became the personal assistant to the saint and one of his disciples. He told me that he often saw Columbanus, when he was taking a walk in the wilderness and was devoting himself to fasting and prayer, how he would frequently summon wild animals, beasts, and birds which would come immediately at his command, and he would pet them gently. The savage animals and birds, rejoicing and playing with great delight, would then jump about, just as puppies fawn upon their masters. And the aforementioned man [Chagnoald] said he had often seen the little animal, which people commonly name a squirrel, called down from the tops of high trees, taken in his hand and put on his neck where he let it crawl in and out of his habit.[92]

Among other nature interactions of Columbanus that cause Jonas to wonder are the saint's ability to survive untouched despite being surrounded by a pack of 12 wolves in the forest, commanding a bear to leave a cave where the saint subsequently lives, and correctly predicting that a raven which stole one of his gloves will return it, a story similar to one in the *Vita sancti Guthlaci*.[93]

The participation of the created order in the ritual and even liturgical lives of the early saints is perhaps built on a much greater depth and range of cosmological thinking than

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[90] Jonas: *Vita Columbani* I. 17, *MGH SS rer. Germ.* 37, p 185-6. This passage is one of several under dispute in Krusch's *MGH* edition, and the most recent translation, cited below, moves this passage to the end of I.15, and omits the first sentence, in order to follow the slightly older Metz manuscript. For discussion see *Jonas of Bobbio; Life of Columbanus; Life of John of Réomé; and Life of Vedast*, trans. by Alexander O'Hara and Ian Wood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), p 83, 127, 278.

[91] This author's translation of the first sentence.

[92] Translation from O'Hara and Wood (2017) p 127, where this passage appears at the end of I.15; the first sentence (in italics) is moved into the translation from p 127, *n*. 190, and is supplemented with an alternative translation (above).

[93] *Vitae Columbani* I.8, p 166-7 for the wolves and bear; I.15 p 178-9 for the raven, which compares with *VSG* ch. 40.

many scholars recognise in studies of the cultural expressions of Christianity in Britain and Ireland.

3.5 Celtic Christianity and ethnic identity in early medieval Britain

In conclusion to the introductory chapters, it is necessary to give a brief explanation for the way in which two terms are used in this research: 'Celtic' and 'British'. Both of them are capable of bearing a wide range of meanings, including ethnic, geographic, religious and cultural identities, which scholars frequently elide without due consideration. To take one example of the most prolific writers on Celtic Christianity, who bridges academic and popular interest in the subject, Ian Bradley has written perceptively on the tendency for later generations to project back on to this enigmatic period their own cultural and theological desires.[94] And yet in the same work he elides early medieval religion with modern notions of national identity, using Celts and Celtic in this sentence to describe two entirely different categories:

> Again and again it has been outsiders and exiles rather than native Celts who have been most attracted to Celtic Christianity and most assiduous in identifying and celebrating its distinct ethos and character.[95]

The term Celtic is used in this research to describe the church in Britain and Ireland that preceded the Roman mission of 597, and which found itself in disagreement with it on a number of important points as the two underwent a drawn-out process of dialogue and eventual alignment. The term Celtic is therefore used in this research as a collective description of this religious tradition and its various cultural expressions. An Anglo-Saxon could be a Christian in the Celtic tradition, as indeed many were, so the term is employed without ethnic or tribal connotations.

[94] Bradley (1999).
[95] *Ibid*. p 3.

Nicholas Higham is perhaps the leading scholar who has stressed the fluidity of ethnic and cultural boundaries in early medieval Britain, no doubt in part due to the fact that he draws on archaeological as well as textual evidence, and the application of his interpretative framework to the theology of the period in question seems an appropriate way to disentangle the range of concepts which are covered by such broad terms as 'Celtic' and 'British'.[96]

Finally, the word 'British' is used as the possessive of the island of Britain. Other scholars at times use the word 'British' where others would use 'Celtic',[97] once again eliding ethnicity with other, more neutral geographical definitions. The island was a crossroads where numerous influences and cultures gathered, and also one that has its own unique topography on to which Christianity was mapped.

[96] Nicholas J. Higham and Martin J. Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (London: Yale University Press, 2013), p 7.
[97] Blair (2005), p 15.

CHAPTER 4

Missionary theology

As is apparent from existing scholarship about the process of conversion, described in chapter 2, there is very little surviving evidence that sheds light on the nature of missionary theology during this period, a documentary silence that has prompted many to conclude that there was effectively no process of mass conversion, but rather a strategic negotiation at the most senior levels of society. This research therefore seeks to interrogate the limited surviving material with a new methodology, based on the criterion of embarrassment, which focuses on the few incidents in the textual records of the conversion era that cast a negative light on Christianity as it engages with pre-Christian attitudes. This has much to recommend it as a methodology for interrogating a church in its nascent and rapidly evolving stage, when conflicts, failures and reversals during the missionary campaign to introduce Christianity would be expected, and can indeed be glimpsed. There is also a very limited number of cases where two or more writers have described the same historical event, allowing a productive interrogation of their different perspectives. The methodology reveals that missionaries responded to popular scepticism with a discernible stress on the ability of Christianity to manipulate humanity's relationship with the environment.

4.1 Using the criterion of embarrassment to interrogate the conversion process

As can be seen from the survey of existing scholarship, Ronald Hutton offers some of the most penetrating analysis of the conversion era, perhaps because his concern is to approach pre-Christian beliefs as a topic worthy of academic study in their own right, a corrective to the one-sided historical record. He also briefly refers to an interpretative model along the lines of the criterion of embarrassment methodology described in chapter 2. More significantly still, he illustrates the point by referring to two specific

incidents that survive in the historical record, one of which is the focus of the remainder of this chapter. These incidents are recorded by Bede in his writings about St Cuthbert, describing how the common folk jeered at a group of monks who were having difficulty at sea, and how a time of plague saw people reverting to amulets and incantations for protection.[98]

As will be seen, pursuing this line of enquiry further into such narratives unearths a productive seam of material about beliefs connected to the landscape. The incident with the raft is particularly interesting for its intense focus on an interaction with the natural world as a battleground between Christian missionaries and their potential converts. Two other incidents of a loosely similar complexion are also examined in this chapter. All three incidents are described in texts written within a few decades of each other, and in summary are as follows:

- A croaking crow which distracts potential converts to Christianity in the *Vita Gregorii Magni*. This is the earliest known hagiography of the pope, written at Whitby between 704 and 714.[99]

- The jeering crowd of onlookers who watch some monks drifting out to sea, introduced above. This is recorded in the prose *Vita sancti Cuthberti* completed by Bede in 721; Bede's earlier, metrical *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* (*c*. 710-720) offers an interesting and slightly different perspective on same incident, without any reference to the onlookers.[100]

[98] *VCP* ch. 3 and *VCM* ll. 99–104 for the raft incident; *HE* III.30, *VCP* ch. 9 for the plague incident.
[99] Colgrave (1985), p 48.
[100] Michael Lapidge, 'Bede's Metrical Vita S. Cuthberti', *Cuthbert, His Cult and Community to AD 1200*, ed. by G. Bonner, D. Rollason, and C. Stancliffe (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1989) pp 77-93, at p 85 for dating of both the *VCM* and *VCP*.

• Two thegns who murder king Sigeberht of the East Saxons following his conversion and during the conversion of his tribe because they object that he has become too willing to forgive his enemies. This is recorded in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*, which was completed around 731.

Although shaped by the writers into narratives that vindicate the missionaries' spiritual authority, all three of these incidents rely on the supposition that ordinary people could be hostile to Christianity, and were able to articulate objections that required some form of rebuttal. These are of particular interest for this research into nature rituals because the first two items demonstrate that the language and imagery which the Christian missionaries used in this rebuttal were entirely dependent on observations of and interactions with the natural world. The third incident records what happened when missionaries did not employ such a nature-based tactic but instead attempted to inculcate Christian morality.

Put together these incidents can help to elucidate why nature rituals were given such prominence in early medieval Britain: part of a missionary strategy to win over a sceptical and at times hostile audience. All three of these incidents also stand in stark contrast to many other early descriptions of conversion, which appear to claim that Christianity was accepted without any concerns or reservations by the pagan converts, an observation that draws obvious attention to the partiality of the authors, and which feeds into current scholarly perceptions that there was no real process of conversion for the majority. It is clear that such sanitised accounts do not do full justice to the complexity of the conversion process: long-term ambivalence towards Christianity up to and including apostasy is pronounced in the records of 7th century Britain.[101]

[101] Hutton (2014), p 319.

4.2 Three conversion incidents that record criticism of Christianity

In the following section, the three conversion incidents that include embarrassing criticisms of Christianity are examined individually. The first two incidents are resolved by an interaction with the natural world that proves successful for the missionary message. The third incident highlights the contrasting outcome of a conversion narrative in which any nature-based theology or intervention is absent.

4.2.1 Conversion incident 1: the crow in the *Vita Gregorii Magni*

The first incident under study concerns criticism directed towards Christianity during the conversion of the people of Northumbria under king Edwin (d. 633), written by an anonymous monk of the monastery at Whitby. The incident revolves around the inauspicious croaking of a crow that disrupts bishop Paulinus' instruction of potential converts.

The author of the *Vita Gregorii Magni* is anonymous, but the editor Betram Colgrave believes it was written between 704-714 based in part on the fact that Ælfflæd is described in the present tense as abbess at Whitby, in chapter 18. In the same chapter, the writer describes how the relics of king Edwin are to be translated to Whitby, and in the following chapter describes their arrival at "our monastery here" and gives a precise description of their location between two altars.[102] Almost half the Whitby *VGM* focuses on events in England that were precipitated by Gregory's decision to send the Augustinian mission, due in part to the anonymous author's relative paucity of sources concerning the pope himself.[103]

[102] Colgrave (1985), p 46-8.
[103] *Ibid.* p 46.

The specific conversion event relates to a bird crowing and then being shot down. The pagan reaction when presented with a dichotomy between the spiritual power of Christian song and the spiritual power of birdsong is more of confusion and reluctance than outright hostility. The entire encounter is recorded as follows:

> Cum stipatus ad eclesiam rex prefatus ad caticuminum eorum qui adhuc erant gentilitati non solum, sed etiam et non licitis stricti coniugiis, cum illo festinavit ab aula ubi prius adhuc utrumque emendandum hortati sunt ab illis, dum quedam stridula cornix ad plagam voce peiorem cantavit. Tunc omnis multitudo regia que adhuc erat in platea populi, audiens avem, stupore ad eam conversa subsistit, quasi illud canticum novum carmen Deo nostro non esset vero futurum in eclesia, sed falso ad nihil utile. Tunc venerandus episcopus puero suo cuidam, Deo omnia ex arce sua speculante providenteque, "Dirige," inquit, "sagittam in avem otius." Quo festinanter effecto, avis sagittam servari precepit usque dum, peracto catacuminio eorum qui erant catezizandi, asportatur in aulam. Omnibusque illuc congregatis recenti rudoque adhuc populo Dei bene satis eo causam donante, confirmavit antiquum scelus nomen idolatrie, tam evidenti signo esse pro nihilo in omnibus discendum dicens etiam sibi ipsi avis illa insensata mortem cavere cum nescisset, immo renatis ad imaginem Dei baptizatis omnino hominibus, qui dominantur piscibus maris et volatilibus celi atque universis animantibus terre, nihil profuturum prenuntiet, quas illi ex sua subtili natura ad deceptionem stultorum se scire, Deo iuste permittente, iactitant.
>
> King Edwin was hurrying to the church to receive instruction, surrounded by a crowd of those who were still bound not only to heathenism but also to unlawful wives; they had left the hall where they had been exhorted to put both these matters right when a crow set up a hoarse croaking from an unpropitious quarter of the sky. Thereupon the whole of the royal company, who were still in the public square, heard the bird and turned towards it, halting in amazement as if they believed that the "new song" in the church was not to be "praise unto our God," but something false and useless. Then, while God looked down from his heaven and guided everything, the reverend bishop said to one of his youths, "Shoot the bird down quickly with an arrow." This was speedily done and then the bishop told him that the arrow from the bird was to be kept until the instruction of the catechumens was finished and then brought into the hall. Then when they were all gathered together there, he gave the people of God who were recent converts and still uninstructed, a very good reason for this event; he assured them that they ought to learn from so clear a sign that the ancient evil called idolatry was in all respects useless; "for," he said, "if that senseless bird was unable to avoid death, still less could it foretell the future to men who have been reborn and baptized into the image of God, who 'have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing upon earth'; yet these foretellers boast that they understand the ways of birds by their own native cunning and so deceive the foolish, as God's permissive will allows."[104]

[104] *Vita Gregorii Magni*, ch. 15, p 96-99.

This event provides a rare insight into the interplay of pagan and Christian beliefs with regard to the natural world, and is of interest for its intellectual content as much as its historical content. Indeed there is less need for certainty about historical accuracy if the text is used to interrogate a history of ideas: if the details themselves are the work of an imaginative scribe, it remains the case that the ideas expressed by the protagonists in the incident need to have a degree of plausibility in order for any such 'fiction' to work. The bird, its croaking and its killing all need to carry a certain degree of spiritual meaning for the story to make sense in its own time. However, the inclusion of uncensored criticism of Christianity gives grounds for thinking that the details as well as the cultural context of this story have a demonstrable degree of historical accuracy.

One thing to deduce from this incident is that there was some form of religious belief about birds that was held up in serious opposition to the Christian message. Indeed the pagan criticism of Christianity is explicitly recorded, a fact which passes the 'embarrassment' test of historical plausibility: *falso ad nihil utile* 'something false and useless'. We have very little evidence about the specific ritual ideas, taboos and totems of the paganism that Christianity had to challenge and out-narrate in a British context, so caution is needed before placing too much weight on this rare record. But to understand its place in the conversion era, it can be contextualised by examining how its theological rebuttal of pagan belief is demonstrated in a physical way.

The theological formula that Paulinus uses to counter superstition about the prophetic power of birds is provided by the text, a citation from the Bible: humans are able to kill the bird because they have 'dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing upon earth', Genesis 1:28. The narrative arc attempts to steer the pagan audience through their attachment to birds towards sight of a bigger power that operates in precisely the same natural domain. This citation of Genesis is thus a very rare glimpse of missionary theology, the significance of which will be

developed below in conjunction with the evidence from the second 'embarrassing' conversion incident, and with reference back to Bede's theological formula.

4.2.2 Conversion incident 2: monks adrift at sea in Bede's *Vita sancti Cuthberti*

The second incident in which criticism of early Christianity is found in the historical record occurs in Bede's prose – and to a lesser extent his verse – *Vita sancti Cuthberti*. This appears early in the prose *vita*, chapter three, an incident that Bede adds to his primary source, the *vita* written by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne. He describes how some monks from a monastery at the mouth of the Tyne were carrying wood in rafts across the river when a storm blew up and began to drive them towards the open sea. What is interesting in the context of this study is the criticism that some locals express in response to the spectacle. Cuthbert, who at this stage is also a member of the laity, is standing among them:

> Stabat enim in altera amnis ripa uulgaris turba non modica, in qua stabat et ipse. Quae cum aspectantibus cum tristitia monachis raptas porro per mare cerneret rates, adeo ut quasi quinque aues paruulae, quinque enim erant rates, undis insidentes apparerent, coepit irridere uitam conuersationis eorum, quasi merito talia paterentur, qui communia mortalium iura spernentes, noua et ignota darent statua uiuendi. Prohibuit probra deridentium Cuthbertus, Quid agistis inquiens fratres, maledicentes his quos in loetum iam trahi uidetis? Nonne melius esset et humanius Dominum pro eorum deprecari salute, quam de illorum gaudere periculis? At illi rustico et animo et ore stomachantes aduersus eum, Nullus inquiunt hominum pro eis roget, nullius eorum misereatur Deus, qui et ueteres culturas hominibus tulere, et nouas qualiter obseruare debeant nemo nouit.
>
> For on the other bank of the river stood no small crowd of the common people, and he was standing among them. These were watching the rafts on which the monks were sadly gazing, being carried so far out to sea that they looked like five tiny birds riding on the waves, for there were five rafts. Thereupon they began to jeer at the monks' manner of life, as if they were deservedly suffering, seeing that they despised the common laws of mortals and put forth new and unknown rules of life. Cuthbert stopped the insults of the blasphemers, saying: "Brethren, what are you doing, cursing those whom you see being carried away even now to destruction? Would it not be better and more kindly to pray to the Lord for their safety rather than to rejoice over their dangers?" But they fumed against him with boorish minds and boorish words and said: "Let no man pray for them, and may

> God have no mercy on any one of them, for they have robbed men of their old ways of worship, and how the new worship is to be conducted, nobody knows."[105]

It is important to note that the jeering crowds are not essential to the underlying miracle story, and indeed are absent from Bede's earlier, metrical *vita*. The story concludes with Cuthbert kneeling down to pray and the wind changing direction to carry the rafts safely to shore. Bede then cites his source for the story, a member of the jeering crowd, who often repeated the anecdote in the presence of one of Bede's fellow monks. The eye witness is described as *rusticae simplicitatis uiro, et simulandi prorsus ignaro*, 'a man of rustic simplicity and absolutely incapable of inventing an untruth'.

This event appears in Bede's verse *Vita sancti Cuthberti*, and although shorter it includes many of the same incidental details:

> Qui veherent dum ligna feri per terga fluenti,
> Fluminis et venti subito feriuntur ab ictu.
> Quinque fuere rates, rapido quae gurgite cunctae
> Oceani canum pronae labuntur in aequor.
> Iamque oculis abstracta procul velut aliger undis
> Mergulus innaret, paret per caerula puppis.[106]

> Once while transporting wood on the surface of this wild river, they were suddenly caught by the wind-blown river. There were five rafts, all of which were seized by the swirling water out into the foam-crested ocean. Now, pulled far from men's eyes, the boats appear through the deep-blue like diving sea-birds floating on the waves.[107]

Brooks (2016) points out that the avian simile appears in both versions, but Bede's language is plainer in the prose version, suggesting that he was "writing with a different, perhaps broader (or less educated) audience in mind."[108] Of particular note, however, is the fact that the earlier verse *vita* goes on to refer to God's power over the elements:

> Condoleamus et his, quos verbera maesta fatigunt, Vel dominum potius, qui flabra creavit et undas Oremus, dignetur iter donare salutis.[109]

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[105] *VCP* ch. 3, p 162-5.
[106] *VCM* ll. 99-104.
[107] Translation from Brooks (2016), p 77.
[108] *Ibid.* p 119.
[109] *VCM* ll. 112-14.

> ‘Let us suffer with those afflicted by lashes of sorrow, or let us pray to the Lord, who created the winds and the waves, that He may grant [them] a safe journey’.[110]

The prose *vita* offers an alternative Christian message to the sceptical common folk, that it would be kinder to pray than to jeer at someone in misfortune, a teaching of morality based loosely on the beatitudes.

Bede does not explain whether the 'common people' in his account are Christian or pagan. Carole Newlands (1997) argues that this incident as described in the prose *Life* is a set-piece confrontation between paganism and Christianity:

> When the monks are saved, the pagan people of the prose life, ashamed of their unbelief, are converted, and praise Cuthbert's faith. Again in the prose *vita*, the youthful Cuthbert foreshadows the future adult, converting the heathen, strengthening the spiritually weak. This episode, too, portrays Cuthbert as a different kind of saint from Martin and Benedict, whose encounters with pagans are violent and involve the destruction of pagan shrines.[111]

Certainly there is a difference in British and continental conversion stories regarding confrontation over shrines, but Newlands is perhaps overstretching the evidence to describe this in such stark terms as pagan or Christian: it is possible that neither category would quite do justice to them. The rustics have clearly been introduced to Christian worship, and although they find it difficult to understand, what seems to dent their respect most is the inability of the monks to have any degree of control over the elements, or possibly the lack of favour shown to the monks by these elements. These latter two options hint at some sort of belief shaped by close observation of and interaction with the landscape and seascape, a belief which is held up in contrast to the Christian religion. For the purposes of this research, it is not necessary to attempt a precise recreation of what those pre-Christian notions were, but rather to note that they could be held in tension with Christianity during the conversion era, two languages of

[110] Translation from Brooks (2016), p 78.
[111] Newlands, Carol E., ‘Bede and Images of Saint Cuthbert’, *Traditio* 52 (1997),pp 73-109, p 88.

belief that were evaluated in conversation with each other. To call the common people in Bede's anecdote either pagan or Christian would not do justice to the transitional nature of their faith, since they are clearly showing sympathy to both beliefs within the space of a few minutes.

Britton Brooks offers a similar assessment regarding the complexion of the onlookers, although in keeping with his overall thesis uses the context of Cuthbert as a community leader rather than missionary theology:

> The pagans of this episode are, in fact, rustic Christians whose syncretistic beliefs are in need of pastoral reformation, an emphasis that aligns with Bede's overall transformation of the *Vita*.[112]

Bede is certainly keen to promote Cuthbert as an exemplar of the Gregorian monk-pastor, offering pastoral correction and teaching, but the hostility of the rustic onlookers is a rare and plausible record of popular objections to Christianity. These objections merit consideration on their own terms, as argued above, rather than merely serving as a foil to further embellish the single issue of Cuthbert's monastic authority.

4.2.3 Conversion incident 3: a murdered Christian king in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*

The third record of criticism towards Christianity comes in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*. It stands within the same category as the above citations because it too contains negative comments by people who have been introduced to the new faith and found it wanting. Unlike the other two incidents it does not have a successful missionary resolution, but ends in the murder of the devout king Sigeberht. Most notable of all is the fact that the criticisms of Christianity go unanswered, Bede preferring instead to propose an alternative reason for the king's death to the one given by the king's opponents. As such the criticisms can be considered valuable artefacts of a seldom-glimpsed pre-Christian attitude:

[112] Brooks (2016), p 120.

> Cumque tempore non pauco in praefata prouincia, gaudente rege, congaudente uniuerso populo, uitae caelestis institutio cotidianum sumeret augmetum, contigit ipsum regem instigante omnium bonorum Inimico, propinquorum suorum manu interfici. Erant autem duo germani fratres, qui hoc facinus patrarunt; qui cum interrogarentur, quare hoc facerent, nil aliud respondere potuerunt, nisi ob hoc se iratos fuisse et inimicos regi, quod ille nimium suis parcere soleret inimicis, et factas ab eis iniurias mox obsecrantibus placida mente dimitteret. Talis erat culpa regis, pro qua occideretur, quod euangelica praecepta deuoto corde seruaret.
>
> For a long time the instruction of the people in the heavenly life prospered day by day in the kingdom, to the joy of the king and the whole nation; but it then happened that the king was murdered, at the instigation of the enemy of all good men, by his own kinsmen. It was two brothers who perpetrated the crime. When they were asked why they did it, they could make no reply except that they were angry with the king and hated him because he was too ready to pardon his enemies, calmly forgiving them for the wrongs they had done to him, as soon as they asked his pardon. Such was the crime for which he met his death, that he had devoutly observed the gospel precepts.[113]

It is clear that these two thegns objected to the king's devout Christianity. Here the criticism is not that Christianity is ineffective when held up in contrast to the natural world, but is instead directed at the heart of Christian moral teaching. The source of the objections comes from a more elite section of society than appears to be the case with the two other incidents examined above, a first indication that there are at least two missionary discourses to be considered.

This is a particularly rare surviving record of criticism directed against Christianity in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*. Of the book's 25 or so conversion stories it is one of only a very few that includes any mention of specific negative attitudes that were directed back at missionaries. A list of these 25 conversion stories has been compiled as background for this report in Appendix B. This incident with king Sigeberht puts a different complexion on the rather simplified picture that Bede gives in nearly all the other accounts in his *Historia*, where the targets of conversion appear conveniently acquiescent.

[113] *HE* III.22, p 284-5.

It is clear that the king's moral code has become Christian, and that the virtue of forgiveness was not compatible with good leadership in the eyes of some of his followers. That there had been trouble in king Sigeberht's kingdom over the conversion to Christianity is explicit in the wider context of this incident: the East Saxons had previously been converted under bishop Mellitus, and apostatized under king Sigeberht's predecessor king Sigeberht the Small.[114]

Bede describes how the later king was persuaded to convert by king Oswiu during frequent visits to Northumberland, won over by arguments about the uselessness of idols.[115] This account is clearly a text-book application of patristic missiology, a conventional and authoritative line of argument that is far removed from the negotiations over crowing birds and sea breezes that make up the core missionary message in the conversion incidents described above. Such an approach appears in the apostle Paul's missiology,[116] and is greatly developed in Augustine of Hippo's advice on catechizing the uneducated:

> pro deo colerent quod fecit deus: sed etiam ad opera manuum hominum et ad fabrorum artificia curuauerunt animas suas.[117]
>
> instead of God they worshipped that which God made, but even bowed their souls before the works of the hands of men and before the arts of craftsmen.[118]

On his return to the East Saxons, Sigeberht brought teachers to convert his people to Christianity and establish monasteries, which even under Bede's optimistic assessment appears to have been hard work:

> In quibus, collecto examine famulorum Christi, disciplinam uitae regularis, in quantum rudes adhuc capere poterant, custodiri docuit.

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[114] *HE* III.22.
[115] *HE* III.22, p 280-1: *deos esse non posse, qui hominum manibus facti essent* 'objects made by the hands of men could not be gods.'
[116] Romans 1:25; cf Isaiah 44:9-19.
[117] Augustine: De catechizandis rudibus, ch. 19 *CCSL* 46 pp 121-178, cf. also Augustine: *Sermons* 141.3.
[118] *NPNF* series 1, vol. 3, p 661.

> In these places he gathered together a multitude of Christ's servants and taught them to observe the discipline of a Rule, so far as these rough people were capable of receiving it.[119]

It is unknowable how far the missionaries continued to pursue the patristic missionary theology of Augustine among the East Saxon people that had won over their king, but whatever their approach it is clear that it was a difficult enterprise, and met with a pronounced degree of hostility by some.

As an aside, it is curious that no historian, theologian or even Bede himself has apparently pondered the status of king Sigeberht as a martyr. Perhaps the incident is seen as simply a local dispute and has been obscured by Bede's gloss on the cause of it, but there are virtually no other deaths in early medieval Britain before the arrival of the Vikings that bear so many hallmarks of martyrdom.

Bede's record of the reason why the thegns decided to kill the king has a degree of plausibility about it because of the inclusion of critical words against Christianity, particularly because this criticism goes unanswered. Bede instead changes the narrative entirely at this point and proposes a prophetic explanation for the murder: bishop Cedd had previously forbidden the king from visiting the thegn because of the latter's illicit marriage. Cedd subsequently caught the king emerging from the thegn's home and prophesied that the king would ultimately meet his death in the same building as punishment for his disobedience.

It is curious that Bede presents two contexts for the thegns' attack on the king, their own stated objection to his forgiveness, and the Christian ban on illicit marriages. The ban would by itself be sufficient motivation for hostility to the king and his new moral

[119] *HE* III.22, p 284-5.

codes, since this is one of the best-documented problems during the conversion period.[120]

Yet it must be remembered that in his account of king Sigeberht's murder Bede repeats the thegns' formally presented explanation for the murder, another reason to consider this may well be a genuine historical record of their stated objection to Christianity. Even without Bede's obvious attempt to divert the conversation towards a moral argument about illicit marriage, the thegns' overt objection to Christianity stands as a plausible and rare insight into the difficulties of reconciling a new set of values to the existing military culture of a royal retinue. In a militarised tribal society, it seems that Christian virtues of forgiveness and charity were not one of the selling points of the new religion. This point is echoed precisely by the lay folk standing on the shore in Bede's prose *Vita sancti Cuthberti*: the message of Christian charity appears to have fallen on embarrassingly unsympathetic ears.

There are clearly not enough such incidents to know beyond any reasonable doubt how the general population of Britain was steered through the conversion period, but these fragments reflect a relatively consistent picture of the key terms in the dialogue. Conventional approaches towards catechizing the laity by teaching them Christian charity, morality and rules on marriage appear to have received a mixed reaction that included scorn and outright hostility. Physical demonstrations of control over the natural world gained a uniquely positive reception.

Thus it can be concluded for now that there appears to be a missionary strategy behind these engagements with hostile pre-Christian attitudes. The theological arguments used

[120] Compare, for example, the potential converts in the Whitby *VGM* who were still *non licitis stricti coniugiis*, 'bound... to unlawful wives'; archbishop Laurence of Canterbury's battles with king Eadbald over his intended marriage to his step-mother (*HE* II.5-6); and pope Gregory the Great's letter of advice on the subject of marriage to blood relatives (*HE* I.27).

by leading church figures were adapted to suit the circumstances of early medieval British society, as they have been done in every iteration of conversion before and since around the world. In Britain, however, the adaptation of the Christian message to focus on its agency in the natural world had some peculiar consequences.

4.3 Towards an understanding of missionary theology

The above research demonstrates that there does appear to be a discernibly theological conversation that formed the basis for a missionary strategy directed towards the lay folk of Britain. The fact that the two successful conversion incidents examined here, the croaking crow and the rafts blown out to see, are given exegetical authority lends support to the notion that there was a conscious missiological strategy that helped to shape conversations with pagan converts. The apparently successful theological argument did not rest on New Testament moral or ethical discussion, nor even on the promise of eternal life, but rather harked back to the first book of the Bible, to the Creation story. More specifically, it is the notion that God has given humans authority over creation, a lost dominion that the holy man or woman would be able to reveal. As described, the precise biblical citation in the Whitby *VGM* is *dominantur piscibus maris et volatilibus celi atque universis animantibus terre*, which is clearly from Genesis 1:28, and which appears in full in the Vulgate as:

> benedixitque illis Deus et ait crescite et multiplicamini et replete terram et subicite eam et dominamini piscibus maris et volatilibus caeli et universis animantibus quae moventur super terram[121]
>
> And God blessed them, and he said, "Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the flying creatures of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

[121] All Bible citations are from *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. Robert Weber, Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007)

In the raft incident, Bede's metrical *Vita sancti Cuthberti* alludes less directly but still discernibly to the Creation story, framed in terms of God's rule over the elements (*qui flabra creavit et undas*, 'who created the winds and the waves'). This power over nature can be successfully turned to the good of humans by Christian prayer.

The significance of this exegetical argument in a missionary context becomes clear when compared to the study in the previous chapter. This is the same theological point, indeed the precise biblical citation, that Bede uses to explain the nature rituals of Cuthbert, in his powerful and seemingly original theological formula. This requires no scholarly interpretation because Bede himself makes the link explicit in his formula, which cites this very incident as observed evidence of the saint's authority over the wind. A new light is thus thrown on its significance when set against the early missionary entanglement with sceptical common folk. The dominion of humans over nature is at the heart of both these passages: missionary theology to the common people and the intense nature interactions performed by saints. What is perhaps more remarkable still is the independence of these two records, since there is virtually no evidence that Bede knew the text of the Whitby *VGM*, a point that will be further developed below. Two writers from different monasteries, writing independently of each other's works, have based a missionary interaction with the common folk on the same short verse from Genesis. Given the paucity of historical documentation of such interactions, one of these incidents by itself is of rarefied value. The fact that they corroborate each other is of prime significance.

By placing ritualistic interaction with nature in the context of challenging pagan objections to Christianity, we have a first glimpse of why nature rituals were so important in the early church: they were a physical demonstration of missionary theology aimed at the people. A dispute with the common folk about the validity of Christianity and the nature rituals for which early saints were celebrated are both

predicated on the same biblical precedent, the tenet that humans were originally given authority over the rest of creation by a single creator God.

It can therefore be concluded that the arguments of the missionaries was that the natural world behaves in a capricious, chaotic manner – which to the pagan reveals spiritual forces operating – because of humanity's disobedience to God. The proof of this is that a holy man or woman can exercise authority over the natural world to introduce a more harmonious interaction. The objection of the common people in the *VGM* to Christianity is not simply that it is untrue, but it is also 'useless': *falso ad nihil utile* 'something false and useless'. People wanted to see an agency in Christianity that operated on the natural world for a practical benefit.

It is possible to sharpen the relief in which this particular missionary theology can be discerned by contrasting it to the accounts that contain criticism of other missionary approaches. It would appear that efforts to teach the common people of the merits of a new, Christian morality were met with a notable disdain. Cuthbert's exhortation in the prose *Vita sancti Cuthberti* to the people on the shore to behave in a charitable way towards the endangered monks falls on deaf ears. Alongside that are the two murderous thegns who killed king Sigeberht on account of his Christian morality. It becomes apparent that the rare pieces of surviving criticism directed towards Christianity by common people during the conversion period were very hostile towards notions of charity and forgiveness: teaching the moral virtues of Christianity was singularly unsuccessful among the people of early medieval Britain. Rather, what is notable in the two successful conversion stories is the fact that the winning tactic of the missionaries is not found in their recourse to intellectual arguments, but in their engagement with the natural world: the bird is shot down and Cuthbert falls to his knees and prays for the wind to change direction. Both of these are subsequently supported by Christian

exegesis, but it is only a physical intervention that appears to convince the sceptical audiences of the truth of the Christian message.

As mentioned, this constellation of ideas and practice as primarily a missionary strategy also runs counter to the direction of recent scholarship studying the nature interactions of the early church. The conclusion of other commentators has been to find a tropological or moral lesson in the early medieval hagiographies that was primarily intended to inculcate the need for obedience among members of a monastery.[122] There is certainly a didactic message to be found in the obedience of nature to a holy man or woman, as Brooks demonstrates consistently, but as argued in chapters 1 and 2, the tropological was one of many meanings that adhered to early medieval literature in Europe, both for readers and writers.

The notion that a saint's *imperium* was obeyed by the natural world as a sort of moral lesson in monastic obedience was therefore only part of the theological picture. The conversion stories examined here clearly demonstrate that obedience by the natural elements and creatures in the presence of a saint was specifically promoted to counter objections from lay people who were resistant to the new Christianity.

4.4 Practical consequences of early British missiology

One consequence of this missionary strategy is that the missionaries would be skating on rather thin ice when they tried to claim that their new religion gave a degree of control over the elements and the natural world. It works perfectly well as a theological argument but has an obvious weak point when it comes to observed reality. In this context, the mission of St Wilfrid to the people of Sussex aligns the tactic with an even

[122] Brooks (2016) *passim* but especially at pp 13, 22-27, 67-73, 197-201. Brooks does however raise the prospect that the monastic world was itself intended to function as a model for the wider world, a perceptive line of enquiry and one that might be reframed, at p 22.

more overtly strategic approach, one that might almost be described as cynical in its marshalling of resources. Bede claims that Wilfrid's arrival and conversion of the people shortly after the year 678 brought a miraculous end to a famine caused by drought, since it starts to rain for the first time in three years on the very day when the people are baptised. Bede elides this development with the convenient fact that Wilfrid simultaneously taught the local people how to fish with nets.[123] In this account it is notable that there was also a monastery previously established in Sussex by an Irish monk called Dícuill, at Bosham, who tried to convert the people

> Sed prouincialium nullus eorum uel uitam aemulari uel praedicationem curabat audire.
>
> but none of the natives cared to follow their way of life or listen to their preaching.[124]

Once again an attempt to teach Christian morality to the common people had been unsuccessful. Technological advantage in the matter of fishing helped give the impression that the new faith gave an unprecedented degree of control over the environment, and it is clear that Wilfrid was not shy about exploiting this factor when it came to convincing the local people.

As a demonstration of the power of saints to influence the environment, therefore, the nature interventions identified in this chapter clearly have a strategic missionary purpose, and can not be categorised as folkloric, syncretic or ecological in origin. Nor can they be read as exclusively tropological. The stress on ritual interactions with nature by conversion-era saints demonstrates that their *imperium* was not merely intended to impress on monastic communities the need for obedience and discipline, but also served to underline a central argument of missionary theology, that Christianity would improve the relationship between humans and the natural world. This might seem stark but it is

[123] *HE* IV.13.
[124] *HE* IV.13, p 372-3.

precisely what the few surviving conversion negotiations with the lay people of Britain appear to have promised, and precisely what the saints' eye-catching engagements with the landscape delivered.

Assuming it was the case that people were persuaded to convert on the promise of a more beneficent environment, that immediately places the status of the new religion in a somewhat precarious position. The arrival of famine, plague, storms and any other form of natural disaster would expose the vulnerability in the central conversion tactic like nothing else. The stop-start history of the Christianisation of the Anglo-Saxons hinges on this point: if a more benign environment were the proof of Christianity's truth, a hostile environment would be its refutation. The arrival of plague, drought or ecological collapse after conversion would prove fatal to grandiose promises of a reformed creation. The missionaries thought they were pushing at an open door when they promised the lay people a reordering of creation to tame and explain the forces of nature. And they were, but unfortunately for them the door turned out to swing both ways.

The arrival of plague appears to have precipitated a major reversal for the Christian church in Anglo-Saxon kingdoms as late as 664-5. Bede records that king Sighere of the East Saxons rebuilt temples and restored idols in response to the calamity, while Cuthbert undertook an emergency mission out into the countryside when he heard that the people were reverting to incantations and amulets to protect them from the same plague further north, around Melrose.[125]

[125] *HE* III.30, *VCP* ch. 9.

4.5 Conversion without conflict: king Edwin in the *Historia ecclesiastica*

The research presented so far describes a missionary process that is greatly at odds with the conclusions by historians that conversion was a top-down process negotiated at the level of the royal court. The following section attempts to recreate the process by which the historical record has been compiled so as to lead historians to this conclusion, focusing on the way in which Bede introduces a tightly controlled narrative structure to conversion stories.

If read in isolation, Bede's *Historia* gives the impression that the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons was negotiated between secular powers and spiritual leaders – often themselves backed by other secular powers. For the most part, the general population followed mutely and meekly, leaving aside the one significant exception concerning the two thegns who kill king Sigeberht, described above. The review of current literature on the process of conversion demonstrates that historians have largely accepted Bede's historical record of conversion events. However if one reads the hagiographies of the period, including those by Bede, a very different picture emerges: a people in flux, worried, capable of arguing back, unpredictable and independent. There are just enough accounts of missionary interaction with the common folk to discern the existence of a campaign that was designed to address the concerns of ordinary people about an unpropitious natural world. It seems possible therefore that these hagiographies were intended for informing and entertaining a rather broader audience than is conventionally imagined for them. Either way, they certainly report that the saints were established as folk heroes whose actions bolstered the faith that had been inculcated in the common people.

In the context of this investigation into conversion theology, it is particularly interesting to compare Bede's account of the conversion of king Edwin's retinue with the account of

the same conversion in the Whitby *VGM*. In Bede's narrative the participants are the king's *amicis principibus et consiliariis*, 'loyal chief men and his counsellors',[126] whereas in the *VGM* the text implies a much larger group of the king's company were involved in the discussion, which took place in a public area (*omnis multitudo regia que adhuc erat in platea populi* 'the whole of the royal company, who were still in the public square').[127] At first sight the two accounts are so different they appear to be describing different historical events: the Whitby *VGM* describes discussion about the croaking crow, while Bede relates how the king's advisers convinced themselves of the merits of Christianity, and then watched as their pagan *primus pontificum*, 'high priest', desecrated his temple. Closer inspection from a theological perspective indicates that several of the same intellectual concepts can be discerned in both accounts.

Another scholar approaching this topic from a different, literary and exegetical angle has reached a similar conclusion that both accounts are different interpretations of the same historical event.[128] Julia Barrow perhaps overstates the point when she suggests that Bede read and reworked the earlier text by the anonymous author at Whitby, since the accounts are so at variance and are much more likely to draw on different, perhaps oral sources and traditions. As Colgrave's critical edition of the Whitby *VGM* points out, Bede also usually acknowledges his sources and seems unaware of numerous factual details that the Whitby author includes.[129] The methodology of this report is different to Barrow's approach, since it pays close attention to the evidence of friction between pagans and Christians that has survived in the historical record and the way in which Christian missionaries responded to it, and the way that Christian writers recorded this.

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[126] *HE* II.13, p 182-3.
[127] *Vita Gregorii Magni*, ch. 15.
[128] Barrow, Julia 'How Coifi pierced Christ's side: a re-examination of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, II, chapter 13', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 62 (October 2011), pp 693-706, at p 699-700.
[129] Colgrave (1985), p 56-9.

The Whitby monk acknowledges difficulty in the negotiations with king Edwin's entourage, whereas Bede describes an apparently uncritical reception his *Historia*. As a starting point, it can be noted that a methodology based on the criterion of embarrassment would suggest that an account that includes comments critical of Christianity can be considered more likely to be historically accurate than an account that claims Christianity was accepted without objection or reservation.

During the discussion as recorded by Bede, king Edwin gathers his advisers and asks them what they think about the new faith. One adviser offers the charming and much-quoted comparison between a human life and a lone sparrow, fluttering into a banqueting hall on a winter's night for a few moments of light and warmth before leaving through another door into the darkness on the other side. The 'high priest' Coifi states without any apparent reservations that he considers his own religion to be powerless and useless (*quia nihil omnino uirtutis habet, nihil utilitatis religio illa*) and ends up desecrating both his priestly authority and the tribal temple by riding a stallion and casting a spear into the sanctuary.

This is in many ways an interesting reversal of the account of the conversion of king Edwin's retinue described in the *VGM*. The lack of any compunction by the converts, let alone any criticism or doubt about Christianity, is in the methodology of this report an indication that the record is of dubious historical accuracy. Yet it is curious how far Bede's description offers a sort of mirror-image of the *VGM*. Coifi's criticism of his own pagan religion as *nihil utilitatis* (useless) uses precisely the same term that Edwin's people direct not at their own beliefs but at the Christian religion in the *VGM*: *ad nihil utile*, a remarkable juxtaposition.

In addition, the conversion also pivots around a discussion concerning the spiritual significance of a bird. This might well be because the two Edwin conversion accounts

are an attempt to describe the same underlying historical event, which does appear from two very different perspectives to have had the same discussion about the uselessness of one religion when set against another, and about the spiritual significance of birds in that context. Barrow also identifies the story of the crow being shot down in the Whitby *VGM* with the meditation on the bird in the hall in the *HE*.[130]

Barrow reads the text exegetically and argues persuasively that Bede is keen to insert a meditation on redemption into the version of the *VGM*. As stated, however, it is highly unlikely that Bede actually used any part of this *vita*, despite Barrow's assumption that it was directly reworked by him. Her conclusion is that exegetical interpretation rather than historical record is the significance of the passage:

> Overall, it seems safest to read *HE* ii.13 not as a historically accurate description of the council meeting at which the Northumbrians decided to back Christianity and the immediate consequences of this decision, but as a meditation on the Redemption.[131]

Yet care should be taken even with such promising material not to lose sight of the fact that it represents, or misrepresents, an underlying historical event. When set against the more historically plausible account in the Whitby *VGM*, it seems that there was a historical conversion event that both authors knew about and were attempting to record.

It is certainly the case with the methodology developed for this thesis that Bede's account is more historically suspect than that contained in the *VGM*, primarily because it removes any detail that might be considered unflattering to Christianity. In addition, Bede also inserts a meditation on the theme of the afterlife, depicted by reference to the sparrow heading into the darkness at the end of its brief sojourn in the company of humans. The promise of everlasting life is a conventional tool of evangelism, and Bede is keen to demonstrate its efficacy, but it is telling that he might well have reworked a

[130] Barrow (2011), p 699-700.
[131] *Ibid.* p 706.

different consideration of the significance of a bird's death in order to regularise the missionary theology into something more sophisticated and hence flattering to both the royal entourage and the missionary bishop. Bede's account of this incident takes the reader a long way from the materiality and physicality of the conversion process as recorded in the *VGM* and other hagiographical conversion accounts.

Holding out the promise of an afterlife is certainly a more conventional missionary tactic than killing an ominous bird with an arrow.[132] There is some evidence that Germanic people were not particularly convinced by the Christian promise of the afterlife, seemingly because they had their own positive view of the likely fate of their souls after death. One Germanic king, Radbod of Frisia (d. 719), was so unimpressed on hearing that he would be separated from his ancestors under the Christian scheme of the afterlife he decided not to convert while on the threshold of the font.[133] The popularity of afterlife visions in early medieval Britain is worth considering in this context, perhaps a means of convincing the unconverted that the afterlife can be a place of extreme punishment.[134]

It would appear that Bede prefers a more conventional conversion story following a continental template and theology to the rather more messy and anxious discussion about the meaning of a croaking crow, which is hardly creditable to any of the protagonists in the story. Bede has demonstrably reworked the account of the conversion of king Edwin's people, and historians should perhaps be more wary of

[132] Augustine: *De catechizandis rudibus* 7.11 and 16.24.
[133] *Vita Vulframni* 9, *MGH SS rer. Merov* 5, p 668.
[134] Andrew Rabin, 'Bede, Dryhthelm, and the Witness to the Other World: Testimony and Conversion in the Historia Ecclesiastica', *Modern Philology*, 106.3 (2009), pp 375-98, at p 383 where he argues that Bede uses Dryhthelm's vision of the afterlife as a means of conversion, in contrast to Alcuin's 8th-century and Ælfric's 10th-century revisions.

believing his textbook model of missionary success, or simply regarding it as an imaginative work of theological contemplation.

As mentioned, the preservation of criticism in the Whitby *VGM* stands in contrast to Bede's highly sanitised account of the conversion of king Edwin's entourage, yet there are reasons to believe that both Bede and the Whitby author are providing two very different perspectives on the same historical event. Both of them describe a conversion process that evokes birds as helpless before God, and Barrow's article finds further correspondences.[135] Bede's description of a guided evaluation of the truth of Christianity aided by meditation on nature does correspond with the *VGM*'s version of this negotiated conversion as a broad theological subject, but not in the purpose to which it is put. Bede's artful, exegetical and literary manipulation of the historical event and his removal of any hint of resistance towards or criticism of Christianity appears to make his version less interesting historically compared to the *VGM*'s unvarnished and more embarrassing account. It is easy to understand why a modern scholar might well prefer Bede's account, offering far more sophisticated intellectual material, but it would appear that it is also easy to miss the fact that an interesting process of narrative manipulation has been at work.

The focus of historians generally has been to accept Bede's account as broadly accurate, without considering whether there is evidence that disrupts this orderly view of transition to Christianity. Richard Fletcher's 1998 account of the conversion of Europe as a whole focuses on the need for a Germanic king to keep his followers on board during any switch to Christianity. He accepts Bede's account of king Edwin's advisers and their placid acceptance of the new faith, without even considering the rather more bumpy – and hence more believable – progression in the Whitby *VGM*.[136] Fletcher in

[135] Barrow (2011), p 706.
[136] Richard Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe* (London: Fontana Press, 1998), p 238.

common with other historians focuses on the pivotal role that monarchs played in the conversion process, and relegates the experiences of common people:

> Early medieval missionaries were firm believers in the 'trickle-down' effect. The most easily identifiable and consistently pursued element of strategy was the missionaries' choice to work from the top downwards. If you can convert the directing elite then those who are subject to its direction will follow the lead given. Such was the hope, and it was frequently realized.[137]

Bede's editorial shaping of the details of conversion in the court of king Edwin takes the reader a long way from the materiality and physicality of the conversion process. The research presented in this thesis will aim to correct that bias by seeking out and interrogating expressions of Christian piety at their most embodied level.

Despite their many differences, it is particularly interesting to note how far Bede and the anonymous Whitby author seek to distance king Edwin's conversion from the deliberations of his retinue as they ponder the significance of birds. Both writers independently focus on a vision the king is said to have received at an earlier date, while in exile in East Anglia, an interesting similarity in two very different accounts.[138] It would surely not do for Edwin to be won over by references to birds and suggestions of pagan superstition being trumped or outwitted: this was a seminal decision in the life of a tribe, presented as the fulfilment of a prophecy. The conversion theology had limitations, as Bede and others appear to have understood, and for a king to be swayed by promised changes in the relationship with the natural world could taint the legacy of the entire project. It is not surprising that prior to Edwin's formal conversion there are stories that give him a divinely inspired path into Christianity, resting on biblical precedent and divine favour. Not for him the easy promises of better harvests, favourable winds and silenced crows.

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[137] *Ibid*. p 236.

[138] The vision is described in *Vita Gregorii Magni*, ch. 16 and in *HE* II.12. The Whitby *VGM* identifies the figure in the vision as St Paulinus, but Bede describes him as a spirit.

This discussion throws into relief the difficult relationship between conversion and prodigious displays of saintly charisma and power. Did the missionaries rely on spectacular endorsements from the natural world – whether engineered as in the case of Wilfrid's famine relief through fishing, or occurring without neutral observers in the case of many of Cuthbert's nature interactions – to win people over to Christianity? The Whitby *VGM* suggests that the common people were indeed greatly impressed by what the writer describes as miracles, to the extent that this is their primary function:

> que etiam ad idola distruenda infidelium paganorum, vel fidelium aliquando fidem infirmam confirmandam concessa sunt; illorum maxime doctoribus, unde et ibi eo sepius mirabiliusque declarantur, quo fiunt ipsi doctores meliores.
>
> Miracles are granted for the destruction of the idols of unbelieving pagans, or sometimes to confirm the weak faith of believers; most of all, they are granted to those who instruct the pagans, and so, the more gloriously and frequently they are manifested in those lands, the more convincing they become as teachers.[139]

Much of the drama and revelation of hagiographies depends on just such material. By way of curious contrast, however, Bede in his *Historia ecclesiastica* takes a notably more cautious line about such spectacular displays of spiritual power. J. T. Rosenthal, in an essay on this topic, demonstrates that Bede almost never presents miracles as being used to cause conversion:

> Conversion was for Bede a rational or a spiritual process, whereas miracles were wonders to be savored by those who had already joined the elite.[140]

Rosenthal has analysed the *Historia ecclesiastica* and found that of the 24 accounts of conversion, only a few of the earliest conversions involve miracles as "an instrumental part of the process". Rather, he points out the thought-provoking analysis that miracles in the *Historia ecclesiastica* mostly occur after the majority of the English people have been converted to Christianity, from the Synod of Whitby (664) onwards, which is recounted in book three:

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[139] *Vita Gregorii Magni*, ch. 4, p 78-9.
[140] Rosenthal, J. T. 'Bede's Use of Miracles in "The Ecclesiastical History"', *Traditio* 31 (1975), pp 328-35, at p 333.

> We can say that the last two books [four and five] of the *History* comprise about one-third of its total length but that they contain about 28 of the 51 miracle tales, or 55 per cent of the total number.[141]

There is a difficulty in determining what a miracle is, and Rosenthal's article is unfortunately vague on this subject, but it is nonetheless clear that "almost none of his [Bede's] accounts of conversion were dependent upon the occurrence of a miracle" apart from the martyrdom of St Alban where the saint miraculously stops the flow of a stream:

> Only in a few of the earliest accounts of conversion are miracles seen as representing an instrumental part of the process. In the story of St. Alban the saint's miraculous effect upon the stream seems to have been crucial in winning over a large number of the spectators to Christianity. Even here, however, the wording of the text is ambiguous.[142]

It is therefore difficult not to form the impression that there were at least two levels of discourse surrounding the missionary work of the early church, one of which was suitable for kings and the formal historical record, and the other of which was designed to impress the common people. Without digging too deeply into Nock's classification of religion as either 'natural' or 'prophetic' it would appear that the same religion can have elements of both.

4.6 The function of the holy man and woman in conversion theology

As argued above, the nature rituals of holy men and women did not simply serve as morally instructive lessons in obedience among members of a monastic community. There is instead a continuum to be found between these secluded devotions recorded in the hagiographical texts and the missionary impulse to win over the hearts and minds of common people. This raises questions about the audience of the hagiographies themselves, who are typically assumed to be educated monks and nuns, since the research above indicates that the stories they recount sit within the wider context of

[141] *Ibid.* p 330.
[142] *Ibid*. p 333.

early medieval belief and superstition among the laity. Perhaps the boundary is in itself artificial and unnecessary: holy men and women must have acted in part to impress and inspire the common people, and hagiographies would record their actions and cultic acclaim accordingly.

Cuthbert's prayers at the mouth of the river Tyne were not therefore a demonstration of his ecclesiastical authority – he was not even a monk at this stage – but arose from the midst of a crowd of common folk standing on the opposite bank from the monastery itself. Although a modern historian might question whether the incident itself took place, not least because Bede inserted this anecdote into the anonymous author's version of the *Life*, a careful reading of the whole chapter demonstrates that Bede makes two different claims about it. One of these is about the incident itself, but the other concerns its subsequent acclaim by the local people. This second aspect could have been independently verified by Bede's contemporaries, which further indicates a mark of historical plausibility:

> Videntes autem rustici erubuerunt de sua infidelitate, fidem uero uenerabilis Cuthberti et tunc laude digna predicabant, et deinceps predicare nullatenus cessabant, adeo ut frater quidam nostri monasterii probatissimus cuius ipse haec relatione didici, sese haec ab uno ipsorum rusticae simplicitatis uiro, et simulandi prorsus ignaro, coram multis sepe assidentibus audisse narrauerit.
>
> When the countryfolk saw this [the change in wind direction following Cuthbert's prayers], they were ashamed of their own unbelief, but forthwith they duly praised the faith of the venerable Cuthbert, and thereafter never ceased to praise it. In fact a very worthy brother of our monastery, from whose lips I heard the story, declared himself that he had often heard these things related in the presence of many by one of these same people, a man of rustic simplicity and absolutely incapable of inventing an untruth. [143]

It is interesting to note that Cuthbert is here described as 'venerable' while still a young man and a member of the laity: the first nature intervention ascribed to this saint clearly formed part of his popular status as a holy man. Whether or not the underlying event has

[143] *VCP* ch. 3, p 164-5.

any historical basis is immaterial to the claim that this formed part of Cuthbert's folk mythology. The earlier point that this incident has a special claim to being credible because it contains 'embarrassing' information about the early church is supported by Bede's claim that it was still discussed during his own lifetime. It is not absolute proof that a methodology based on the criterion of embarrassment is accurate or robust, but it does appear to support one key finding that emerges from its application to the evidence of both the *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* and the Whitby *VGM*: the common people were greatly impressed by manifetations of power over the forces of nature. Their other complaint, that the new church rituals were esoteric and impossible to understand, further heightens the urgency of this demand for visible, tangible proof. It is also another criticism of the early church, which conducted its services in Latin, that sounds embarrassingly true.

The *imperium* of the saints is not merely a tropological device after all but seems to be directed at power over the natural elements and creatures in order to demonstrate something else again, the power of Christian missionaries over the agency of supposed pre-Christian spiritual powers in the natural world.

Historians have convincingly argued that in early Anglo-Saxon England monasteries should be considered as minster churches, offering a ministry of preaching, baptism and visiting the sick in a period before the development of a parish network.[144] Monasteries were not inward-looking communities, but stood at the centre of a network of political, aristocratic and lay communities with a mission to serve the needs of all of them, to varying degrees. The missionary and pastoral role of minsters led and served largely by monks has thus largely been explored by historians, and it seems reasonable to ask why

[144] *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, ed. by John Blair and Alan Thacker (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992). *passim* but see especially Thacker, Alan 'Monks, preaching and pastoral care in early Anglo-Saxon England', pp 137-170.

the same outward facing impulses can not also be ascribed to the writings they produced. The monasteries were a beacon to the people, and it is argued here that their literature was too.

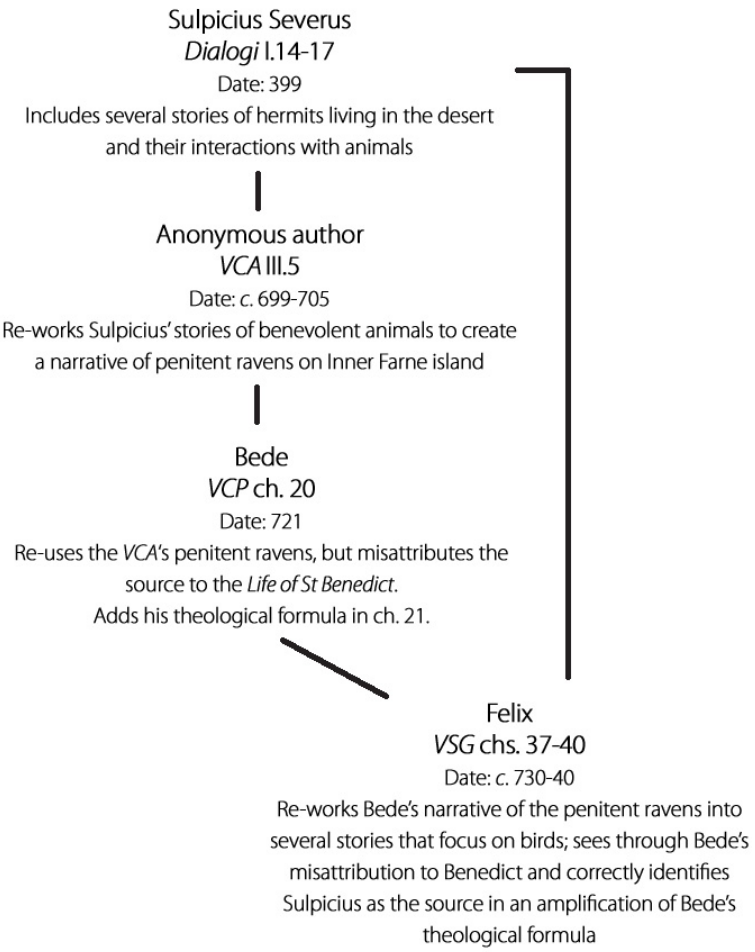
CHAPTER 5

Sulpicius Severus: a major source for nature rituals in British hagiography

This chapter begins by investigating a puzzling passage in Felix's *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* that cites, but does not name, an influential early text about ritual interaction with nature. The research below identifies the text in question as part of the writings of Sulpicius Severus. This discovery in turn opens up a significant and largely unexplored source of material concerning Christian holy men and their interaction with the natural world, material that was used repeatedly, and sometimes unwittingly, by three of the most important early Christian writers in Britain:

- the monk of Lindisfarne who wrote the anonymous *Vita sancti Cuthberti*
- the Venerable Bede
- Felix, who wrote the *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* and makes the oblique reference to the mysterious text.

The line of transmission of the source text through these three writers in Britain is a slightly convoluted but richly productive area of investigation. The research requires an understanding of the extent to which each writer depended on or was ignorant of all the previous writers in their reworking of this source text. To a limited degree, scholars have acknowledged a narrative connection between Severus and Anonymous, but the connection with Felix is considerably more revealing, drawing attention to a much larger cultural, literary and theological impact that clusters around the reception of material about eastern hermits in early medieval Britain. This chain of transmission is made clearer in a flow diagram that demonstrates how all four texts are related to each other, the lines indicating where a writer was aware of and drew on a previous source or sources.



The many conclusions that can be drawn from this textual research are individually relatively straightforward, though their inter-related nature somewhat complicates the process of piecing these together. However, as will be demonstrated all of this work builds up a remarkably consistent picture about Christian thought in early medieval Britain and the emphasis that all its writers place on the ritual interaction with nature. This devotional relationship between humans and the natural world is notably more intense than anything found in the earlier source material of Sulpicius Severus.

The text by Severus is one of many sources and traditions that fed in to the culture and theology of early medieval Britain, but in terms of ritual interaction with nature there is little that compares with it in terms of its significance and impact. It is the primary corridor which connects the pioneering hermits of the eastern deserts with their British counterparts.

5.1 Felix's citation of an unnamed source text: 'have you not read...?'

In chapter 3, attention was focused on the explicit theological justification for nature rituals and interactions by early holy men and women in Britain. In particular, Bede's prose *Vita sancti Cuthberti* refers to a reordering of creation that can be precipitated by devotional obedience: if a human obeys God, it is 'no wonder' that the creatures of the sea and air – along with the elements – should in turn obey him or her.

Current scholarship has tended to focus on the monastic milieu in which such hagiographical accounts of nature interactions was received, with an emphasis on the tropological message designed to reinforce monastic obedience.[145] However, as the previous chapter argued there also appears to be a close connection between nature interactions and the few recorded objections of lay folk towards Christianity. This therefore indicates that there was a missionary purpose to the claim that nature will obey devout Christians, that these stories were intended for wider promotion outside the narrow confines of the monastic community.

Bede's brief theological formula has some loosely related precedent in patristic writings and certain parallels among eastern Christianity, but no precise line of transmission or theological precedent has been uncovered or suggested by researchers to date. However, Bede's formula is in turn repeated and subsequently amplified by Felix in his *Vita sancti Guthlaci*. It is this amplification that allows us to unlock the great significance of material written by Sulpicius Severus in the intellectual and cultural development of early medieval Britain. For this reason, Felix's extensive reworking of the Severus

[145] Specific citations, explored in more detail in chapter 7, include Olga Gusakova, 'A Saint and the Natural World', in *God's Bounty? The Churches and the Natural World* ed. by P. Clarke and T. Claydon (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2010), pp 42–52, at p 52; Crane (2012), p 25; Brooks (2016) reads monastic obedience as central in the *VCA* (p 11 and *passim*), but detects a shift to focus on Cuthbert's obedience to the monastic office in the *VCM* (p 67-73) and a further shift to place Cuthbert as an ideal monk-pastor in his humility and his own obedience to authority in the *VCP* (p 138, 151-2).

material is examined first in this chapter. Even though he is the last of the three British writers in the line of transmission, he is the only one to refer explicitly to this source, and demonstrates the way in which the two previous British writers can be read and understood in this context.

In chapter 38 of the *VSG*, Felix repeats Bede's theological formula without citation, in a passage that describes how Guthlac would patiently tolerate ravens or jackdaws (*corvi*) stealing from his hut, and he would summon wild animals and fish and feed them by hand.[146] He does not significantly alter Bede's formula, but does add two brief biblical citations to bolster its credentials (Isaiah 1:19 and Matthew 17:19). His second theological commentary follows in the next chapter, and is an amplification of the same overall theological theme. But, significantly, it is illustrated with references that are not found anywhere in Bede's writings and refers to an earlier, unnamed authority:

> 'Nonne legisti, quia, qui Deo puro spiritu copulatur, omnia sibi in Deo coniunguntur? et qui ab hominibus cognosci denegat, agnosci a feris et frequentari ab angelis quaerit? nam qui frequentatur ab hominibus, frequentari ab angelis nequit?'
>
> 'Have you not read how if a man is joined to God in purity of spirit, all things are united to him in God? and he who refuses to be acknowledged by men seeks the recognition of wild beasts and the visitations of angels; for he who is often visited by men cannot be often visited by angels.'[147]

Unlike his first passage, borrowed without attribution from Bede, Felix[148] acknowledges a written source ('have you not read...?), but does not identify it by name. Perhaps because Felix added two scriptural references to Bede's formula in chapter 38, Britton Brooks speculates that Felix could once again be referring to the Bible, although he acknowledges it is not immediately clear which precise scriptural text would fit.[149]

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[146] *VSG* ch. 38, p 120-1.
[147] *VSG* ch. 39, p 122-3.
[148] Throughout this report Felix is cited as the author of this quotation, even though it appears in the words of Guthlac in his text: hagiography is more a literary creation than a verbatim record of historical events.
[149] Personal communication with Britton Brooks.

Brooks' tentative view is greatly bolstered by the Old English version of the *Life of Guthlac*, which inserts just such a reference in its translation of the passage, without citing any specific verses (bold underlined emphasis added):

> Ne leornodest þu, broðor Wilfrið, **on halgum gewritum**, þæt se þe on godes willan his lif leofode, þæt hine wilde deor and wilde fugelas þe near wæron; and se man, þe hine wodle fram woruldmannum his lif libban, þæt hine englas þe near comon.[150]
>
> "Have you not learned, brother Wilfrid, **in holy Scripture**, that he who has lived his life in God's will, the wild beasts and wild birds come near to him; and the man who lives his life apart from worldly men, to him the angels come near."[151]

As Brooks and the present author have agreed, it is likely that the Old English writer was simply responding to the same challenge that modern scholars face when considering this unnamed authority, filling in the blank by assuming that Felix must be referring to the Bible. Yet all biblical incidents which could arguably describe angelic encounters in the wilderness would be a long stretch to match Guthlac's circumstances. Brooks has identified one possible non-biblical source of inspiration for Felix's theological aside, Augustine of Hippo's homily 8.7 in his *In Epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos Tractatus Decem*, but in personal correspondence acknowledges that it is highly unlikely to be sufficiently well-known to merit such an indirect reference.[152] In addition, Felix is clearly referring to an unnamed hermit, which by itself suggests a figure from the desert tradition of the 4th century onwards might be considered.

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[150] The *Old English Prose Life of St Guthlac*, from *Das Angelsächsische Prosa-Leben Des Hl. Guthlac*, ed. by Paul Gonser (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1909), p. 143. This *Life* is dated to some time in the late 9th or early 10th century: Jane Roberts, 'The Old English Prose Translation of Felix's Vita Sancti Guthlaci', in *Studies in Earlier Old English Prose: Sixteen Original Contributions*, ed. by Paul E. Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp 363–79, at p 375-76.

[151] Translation from Brooks (2016), p 250.

[152] Augustine, *In Epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos Tractatus Decem*, Hom. 8.7, PL 35, Cols. 2039–2040. Augustine's text refers to Daniel and the lions rather than birds: '*Agnosce eum qui supra te est, ut agnoscant te quae infra te sunt. Ideoque cum Daniel agnovisset supra se Deum, agnoverunt illum supra se leones*.' ('Acknowledge him who is above you so that those under you may acknowledge you. In the same way when Daniel acknowledged God above him, the lions acknowledged him to be above them.')

The wider context of this passage is a scene in which two swallows fly in to Guthlac's hut while he is entertaining his friend Wilfrid, and sit on him as they sing songs:

> velut cum indicio magnae laetitiae avino forcipe flexuosi gutturis carmen canentes, veluti ad adsuetas sedes devenissent, sese non haesitantes humeris viri Dei Guthlaci inposuerunt, ac deinde, cantulis vocibus garrulantes, brachiis genibus pectorique illius insedebant.
>
> showing every sign of great joy, they opened their beaks and sang a song from their supple throats, as though they had arrived at their accustomed abode; without any hesitation they settled on the shoulders of the man of God Guthlac, and then chirping their little songs they settled on his arms, his knees, and his breast.[153]

Guthlac then produces a basket, in which the swallows build a nest, and which he hangs on the eaves of his hut. This connection between the birds that visit Guthlac and the reference to his being visited by angels suggests that an Irish origin for this passage might be considered, reflecting a culture that frequently depicted birds as angels and vice versa,[154] although once again there is no surviving text that fits the theological formula.

It would be reasonable to conclude that so much material has been lost from the period that the source text cited by Felix has simply not survived, and perhaps that is a reason scholars have not attempted to track down the work in question. Yet the fact that Guthlac cites a source without feeling the need to name it – and rhetorically expresses surprise that his companion Wilfrid (an abbot) might be unaware of it – strongly suggests that there was a relatively famous text in the early 8th century which celebrated an intense interaction with the natural world. The research below has identified a somewhat surprising candidate for the unnamed hermit to whom Felix is referring.

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[153] *VSG* ch. 39, p 122-3.
[154] Mary Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature: The Early Irish and Hebridean Traditions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p 105-118.

5.2 Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogi* book one

In the first book of the *Dialogues* of Sulpicius Severus, the author records a conversation with his close friend Postumianus, who has just returned from three years' pilgrimage, travelling through the Holy Land as far as Egypt. Severus is interested in hearing about the practices of monks in the East, and particularly those who were living in the desert. Postumianus tells him of a hermit living on the flanks of Mount Sinai, an anchorite whom Postumianus was unable to visit:

> quem diu multumque quaesitum uidere non potui, qui fere iam ante quinquaginta annos a conuersatione humana remotus nullo uestis usu, saetis corporis sui tectus, nuditatem suam diuino munere nesciebat. hic quotiens eum religiosi uiri adire uoluerunt, cursu auia petens occursum uitabat humanum. uni tantummodo ferebatur se ante quinquennium praebuisse, qui credo potenti fide id obtinere promeruit: cui inter multa conloquia percontanti, cur homines tantopere uitaret, respondisse perhibetur, eum, qui ab hominibus frequentaretur, non posse ab angelis frequentari.[155]

> even after a long and intensive search, I failed to see him. He had cut himself off from human intercourse some fifty years before. He used no clothing. Covered only by the hairs of his own body, he was enabled by divine grace to ignore his nakedness. Whenever pious men tried to visit him, he ran to some inaccessible place and thus avoided human contact. It was said that he had let himself be interviewed only once, five years before, and that, I suppose, by a man whose strong faith merited the privilege. The two had a long talk together. When the anchorite was asked why he so resolutely avoided men, it is said he replied that whoever receives visits from men cannot receive visits from angels.[156]

This is undoubtedly the text to which Felix is referring. He copies near verbatim the final section 'whoever receives visits from men cannot receive visits from angels':

> qui ab hominibus frequentaretur, non posse ab angelis frequentari [Severus]
>
> qui frequentatur ab hominibus, frequentari ab angelis nequit [Felix]

[155] Sulpicius Severus *Dialogi* Book I.17, *CSEL* Vol. 1, p 169-70.
[156] Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogues* I.17. Bernard M. Peebles, 'Sulpicius Severus: Writings', in *The Fathers of the Church Vol. 7* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949), pp 77-254, at p 184.

Having made the identification with this one phrase, it is relatively straightforward to match the rest of Felix's rhetorical question to the *Dialogi*. Felix lists three items in this question, the last of which is the reference to angelic visitations:

> 'if a man is joined to God in purity of spirit, all things are united to him in God? and he who refuses to be acknowledged by men seeks the recognition of wild beasts and the visitations of angels'[157]

These two items are reasonable summaries of chapters in the *Dialogi* that immediately precede the reference to angelic visitations: the wider context of Severus' book offers the raw material from which Felix constructs these observations about a harmony between a devout Christian and the rest of creation.

At this point it is necessary to set out the contents of Sulpicius Severus' desert stories before proceeding to examine their influence on British hagiographical texts. In the three chapters of the *Dialogi* immediately before the naked hermit appears, Postumianus tells Severus of other hermits who interacted with wild animals.

In chapter 14, Postumianus describes a hermit living in a hut, who was joined at meal times by a she-wolf. The animal would wait patiently until the hermit had finished eating, and then receive leftover bread. One day the hermit was away at dinner time, and the wolf entered his hut and found a basket containing five loaves hanging inside, one of which she took and ate. When the hermit returned he noticed the missing loaf and crumbs on the floor and realised that it must have been taken by the wolf, who felt guilt at her actions:

> ergo cum sequentibus diebus secundum consuetudinem bestia non ueniret – nimirum audacis facti conscia ad eum uenire dissimulans, cui fecisset iniuriam –, aegre patiebatur eremita se alumnae solacio destitutum. postremo illius oratione reuocata septimum post diem adfuit, ut solebat ante, cenanti. sed, ut facile cerneres uerecundiam paenitentis, non ausa propius accedere, deiectis in terram profundo pudore luminibus, quod palam licebat intellegi, quandam ueniam precabatur: quam illius confusionem eremita miseratus iubet eam propius accedere ac manu blanda caput triste permulcet: dein pane duplicato ream suam

[157] VSG ch. 39, p 122-3.

> reficit. ita indulgentiam consecuta officii consuetudinem deposito maerore reparauit.[158]
>
> She was, no doubt, conscious of her presumptuous deed and was refraining from visiting the victim of her wrong-doing. On his part, the hermit was distressed at losing the comfort of the guest and companion of his meals. After seven days, recalled by the hermit's prayers, the wolf was there again, as before, for dinner. The embarrassment of the penitent was easy to see. The wolf did not presume to come close. In deep shame, she would not lift her eyes from the ground. It was plain that she was imploring some act of pardon. The hermit had pity on her confusion. He ordered her to come near and with a caressing hand stroked her sorrowful head. Then he refreshed the culprit with a double ration of bread. The wolf had received her pardon. She put her grief aside and renewed her habitual visits.[159]

A theological explanation for this incident is also given, using the story to emphasise the need for contrition, and to contrast the behaviour of the wolf with that of non-devout people:

> intuemini, quaeso, Christi etiam in hac parte uirtutem, cui sapit omne quod brutum est, cui mite est omne quod saeuit. lupa praestat officium, lupa furti crimen agnoscit, lupa conscio pudore confunditur: uocata adest, caput praebet et habet sensum indultae sibi ueniae, sicut pudorem gessit errati: tua haec uirtus, Christe, tua sunt haec, Christe, miracula. etenim quae in tuo nomine operantur serui tui, tua sunt, et in hoc ingemescimus, quod maiestatem tuam ferae sentiunt, homines non uerentur.[160]
>
> 'I ask you to consider this very special aspect of Christ's charity. Through His grace even the brute is intelligent, even the savage beast is gentle. A wolf does acts of courtesy, a wolf recognises the sin of theft, a wolf feels guilt and is ashamed. When summoned, she offers her head and perceives that forgiveness has been granted, just as before she had carried the shame of wrong-doing. This is the power, O Christ, of Thy charity; these, O Christ, are Thy miracles. For whatever Thy servants do in Thy name, these things are Thine. And for this, indeed, do we grieve: that savage beasts perceive Thy majesty when men do not revere it.'[161]

The concluding sentence of Severus' theological musing places this story in a Christological context: the good works of the hermit point directly towards Christ, and the guilty wolf is contrasted with people who fail to recognise Christ revealed by such works.

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[158] *CSEL* Vol. 1, p 166-7.
[159] Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogues* I.14. Peebles (1949), p 180.
[160] *CSEL* Vol. 1, p 167.
[161] Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogues* I.14. Peebles (1949), p 180.

In chapter 15 Severus describes a hermit living on the edge of the desert, near Memphis.[162] Two former companions come to visit him for three days, and on the fourth he is walking them back towards their home when a lioness approaches and prostrates herself before the hermit. He follows her to a cave and finds five blind cubs, whose eyes he miraculously opens by touching them. A few days later, the lioness brings the hide of an animal to the hermit's abode and leaves it for him as a gift.

In chapter 16, Postumianus describes another hermit who is living in the desert near Syene,[163] subsisting on a diet of roots. The hermit is unable to distinguish which roots are poisonous and which are nutritious, and ends up violently sick on several occasions until a wild ibex visits him and separates the poisonous from the edible plants with its mouth. Thus instructed, the hermit is able to subsist safely.

When Felix comments on the 'recognition of wild beasts' afforded to holy men, it is therefore abundantly clear that he is once again referring to Severus' *Dialogi* as his source text. At this point it becomes possible to contrast the different lessons that Severus and Felix draw from these interactions.

As cited above, Severus' exegesis on the she-wolf is that the good works of the hermit and the animal's response alike all point towards Christ. It is however notable that Felix collapses a diverse set of theological observations to place the focus firmly on the figure of the hermit, rather than directing the reader towards Christ, as Severus does. Felix knows Severus' text well, but introduces something quite different, placing the human at the head of a reordered creation, emphasising human agency and human interaction with the natural world.

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[162] Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogues* I.15. Peebles (1949), p 181, prefers an MS reading of 'near the Blembi', referring to a tribe in modern-day Ethiopia.
[163] Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogues* I.16. Peebles (1949), p 183, identifies this as the modern Assuam.

5.3 The naked hermit of Mount Sinai

The naked hermit on Mount Sinai to whom Felix alludes seems at first sight a rather startling person to be held up as an example of virtuous living in harmony with the natural world, a rather unlikely candidate for folk hero status. As one of Christian history's most devout nudists – admittedly a field with rather limited competition – he offers a striking witness that Felix at least considers instructive. The man lives without any clothing but, significantly, is said to be unaware of his own nakedness by divine gift. Among very few other figures in Judaeo-Christian history who lived in such a state are Adam in the Garden of Eden and subsequently alongside him Eve, whose arrival had no effect on Adam's attitude towards his own body.

Although the typology of Christ as a second Adam, reversing the effects of the Fall, has a history in Christian thought from the letters of Paul onwards,[164] it is rare to find such a stark recreation of the condition of the Garden of Eden in terms of a restoration of human relationships with animals and with personal nudity. There are a few patristic claims that animals would begin to behave differently around holy men and women when they could detect the 'scent of Adam',[165] and the *Vitae patrum* includes a few hermits who themselves lived naked and like animals.[166] Whether the practice of ascetic nakedness itself was ever a common feature of eremitic Christian life is debatable, although John Cassian recommends bodily nakedness (*corporis nuditatem*) as part of the discipline of the hermit.[167] The most recent translation of this text avoids using the

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[164] 1 Corinthians 15:45-48.
[165] Isaac of Antioch: *Homilies* 77. In: Saint Isaac of Antioch, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian / Translated by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery* (Boston, Mass.: The Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984).
[166] *Vitae Patrum* VI.3.4 where Abba Macarius encounters two naked monks drinking from a lake alongside wild animals, and VI.3.10 where another naked, elderly man is witnessed eating grass like an animal. All three are described uncritically as being motivated by their Christian faith. *Vitae Patrum* I part d describes how Mary of Egypt lived naked in the desert for 47 years and was mistaken for an animal, *PL* 73, col. 677.
[167] John Cassian: *Conlatio* 1.7.1.

word 'nakedness' for *nuditatem* and instead refers euphemistically to 'bodily deprivations'.[168] Further examples of such alterations to the historical record are cited in chapter 8 in connection with devotional bathing practices, a history of censorship which no doubt helps to explain the modern obscurity of the hermit's ascetic practice. The hermit on Mount Sinai is a lonely outrider of this absolute reversion to pre-lapsarian harmony with animals and the human body, but the fact that such disciplines have been quietly forgotten by the Christian record merits referencing here.

To a modern mind, therefore, this figure might seem too obscure or eccentric to be held up as a role model for Guthlac's intense nature interactions, but as argued above, the overall context of Sulpicius Severus' first book of Dialogues has so many animal stories that it seems certain this is the figure whom Felix has in mind. There is no suggestion that Guthlac himself went *au naturel* in the freezing swamps of the East Anglian Fens, but rather that his solitude was on a par with that of the naked hermit, who lived in the notably warmer climate of Mount Sinai.

An initial conclusion can be drawn that this hermit appears to be famous enough, in the author Felix's eyes at least, that he can refer to him indirectly and expect the reader to recognise him. This connection does not appear in any previous research examined to date. Michael Lapidge's study of literary references in early medieval Britain does not include a connection between Felix's work and Severus' *Dialogi*, nor does it mention any of the similar echoes that have been found in other texts, which will be described below. Severus' work survives in three manuscript copies from Anglo-Saxon England,

[168] *John Cassian: The Conferences*, trans. by Boniface Ramsey (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1997), p 45; the translator's introduction on p 36 however translates and comments on this sequence using the more precise rendition 'nakedness of body', indicating that a different editorial hand subsequently altered the main text.

dating from the 10th and 11th centuries, but it was clearly in circulation at the time of Felix and the anonymous monk of Lindisfarne, since they both rework its narratives.[169]

The fact that Guthlac had considerable contact with British Christians, learning to speak their language during a period spent somewhere on the border with Wales,[170] raises the outside possibility that the text by Sulpicius Severus was transmitted into English Christianity from Irish or indigenous British sources, which is one explanation as to why Guthlac knew it. But that rests in part on the assumption that Felix is simply copying Guthlac's words as a record of an actual conversation: given the highly literary and formulaic nature of hagiographies, it is more plausible to assume the words are those of Felix. Even so, the possibility needs to be noted that it may have been Guthlac who actively promoted Sulpicius Severus' first book of *Dialogi*, and that a transmission route through Celtic Christian culture needs to be considered. As will be seen below, Severus' book also influenced early Celtic hagiography written in Lindisfarne, but somehow bypassed Bede, despite his large library and book-borrowing resources.

Although the significance of Sulpicius Severus' text becomes apparent through its identification as the mystery source cited by Felix, it has been mentioned in passing by two other scholars in connection to this and other early British texts but without investigation. Bertram Colgrave's critical edition of the two prose *Lives* of St Cuthbert suggests the reader may wish to

> Compare the charming story of the penitent she-wolf who had stolen the hermit's food..., and of the grateful lioness who brought the hermit the gift of an animal's skin[171]

[169] Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[170] *VG* ch. 34, p 110-111
[171] Colgrave (1939) p 328 endnote to *VCA* III.5.

He also mentions Severus' *Dialogi* among several writers who influenced Felix's descriptions of a saint's power over animals.[172] Colgrave's passing references to these interesting similarities therefore comes close to identifying Severus as a direct source for British nature devotions but does not examine the implications of this. Alan Thacker has also highlighted the influence that the church in Gaul had on early Christianity in Britain, and cited this connection by way of illustration.[173] However academics have not previously made the connection between the naked hermit and Felix's short but striking theological exposition on the relationship between animals, angels and hermits. As it turns out, the way in which writers in Britain re-worked Severus' core narratives is considerably more revealing than the simple identification of a hagiographical topos would ordinarily suggest.

Having established these direct links between Severus' *Dialogi* and Felix's text, it is necessary to consider in chronological order the two other hagiographies written in Britain that make a less extensive but nevertheless revealing use of this material. Felix used the *Dialogi* directly as inspiration for his work, but he also inherits a British line of transmission through the anonymous author of Lindisfarne and then Bede.

5.4 The anonymous *Vita sancti Cuthberti*

The first text written in Britain that borrows material from Severus' *Dialogi* is the *Vita sancti Cuthberti*, written by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne. Severus describes the reconciliation between a hermit and the wolf who stole his bread, a story which clearly provides the inspiration for an account of Cuthbert and his dealings with some troublesome birds on Inner Farne. The *VCA* recounts that two ravens have stolen thatch

[172] Colgrave (1985), p 187 endnote to ch. 37.
[173] Alan Thacker, 'The Social and Continental Background to Early Anglo-Saxon Hagiography' (Oxford University, Unpublished PhD Thesis, 1977), p 90, 101.

from the holy man's roof. After being reprimanded and flying away, they return to apologise:

> post triduum alter e duobus reuertens ante pedes hominis Dei fodienti iam ei, terram supra sulcum expansis alis, et inclinato capite, sedens et merens humili uoce ueniam indulgentie deposcens, crocitare cepit. Seruus autem Christi intelligens penitentiam eorum, ueniam reuertendi dedit. Illi uero corui in eadem hora perpetrata pace, cum quodam munusculo ad insulam ambo reuersi sunt, habens enim in ore suo quasi dimidiam suis adipem ante pedes eius deposuit. Illis iam indulgens hoc peccatum, usque adhuc illic manent.
>
> after three days, one of the two returned to the feet of the man of God as he was digging the ground, and settling above the furrow with outspread wings and drooping head, began to croak loudly, with humble cries asking his pardon and indulgence. And the servant of Christ recognising their penitence gave them pardon and permission to return. And those ravens at the same hour having won peace, both returned to the island with a little gift. For each held in its beak about half a piece of swine's lard which it placed before his feet. He pardoned their sin and they remain there until to-day.[174]

One of the birds attempts to convey its penitence *inclinato capite* ('with drooping head'), which may sound implausible to the point of absurdity, but it is clear that Anonymous is staying as close as he can to his source material, since Severus describes his guilty wolf with its eyes lowered *deiectis in terram profundo pudore luminibus* ('In deep shame, she would not lift her eyes from the ground'). It is the application of a behavioural pattern familiar in dogs – and by extension in a tame wolf – to a raven that renders the text absurd to modern ears. In similar manner, the anonymous author follows Severus' language to describe the reconciliation in terms of a pardon (*venia*), the wolf sensing *indultae sibi ueniae* and Cuthbert's raven asking for *ueniam indulgentie*.

Up until this point in his story, the anonymous author has not substantially reworked the theological or moral lessons of his source material, staying as close as he can to the narrative of the wolf's behaviour, even though it creates some difficulty when transferred to ravens. But the conclusion of his account introduces some radical restructuring and theological innovation.

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[174] *VCA* III.5, p 102-3.

In Severus' account of the guilty wolf, the story ends without any mention of a gift. The following chapter however contains his story of the lioness which brings an animal hide to thank a hermit for opening her cubs' eyes. The presentation of a gift by the lion is entirely separate from the story of the guilty wolf; they are in adjacent chapters but involve different hermits. The anonymous author however merges them into a single story, describing that the two penitent ravens later come to Cuthbert again, each bearing a gift of pig's lard that they lay at his feet. This collapse of the two stories of Severus into a single story turns out to be no mere narrative device.

A close look at the language that Anonymous employs reveals a theological understanding of the transaction that takes it well beyond the original as imagined by Severus. The notion of *indulgens*, forgiveness, and the bird as a penitent ('*paenitentis'*) is present in Sulpicius, but Anonymous introduces another word to describe the behaviour of the birds: the thieving ravens have commited *peccatum*, an actual sin. There is no suggestion that the author is using this language metaphorically or allegorically, but writes plainly that the birds has committed a sin, and one of them comes to Cuthbert as a penitent, for forgiveness.

Three days later, the birds bring their gift of pig's lard. Brooks and other scholars have noted that this transaction is shaped by the monastic practice of reconciliation, although Brooks goes further to see a more fundamental model of contrition that must be sought by all things.[175] Brooks once again pushes the significance out from the confines of monastic discipline, and the trajectory he sets can be followed further still. It is the way in which the birds make amends that needs to be considered with particular attention. The thatch that the bird has stolen belonged to the hermit's guest house:

[175] Brooks (2016), p 55-6.

> uidit duos coruos ante illic longo tempore manentes tecta domus navigantium in portum posite dissipantes, nidumque sibi facientes. Prohibuit autem eos leni motu manus, ne hanc iniuriam fratribus nidificantes facerent.
>
> he saw two ravens, who had been there a long time, tearing to pieces the roof of the shelter built near the landing-place for the use of those who came over the sea, and making themselves a nest. He bade them, with a slight motion of his hand, not to do this injury to the brethren, while building their nests.[176]

Anonymous stresses the point that the birds have damaged a shelter for guests, and thus perpetrated an injury against the guests themselves, Cuthbert chiding them *ne hanc iniuriam fratribus nidificantes facerent* 'not to do this injury to the brethren, while building their nests'. After three days, the ravens return with the gift of pig's lard, and it is the purpose of this in which the entire incident finds its full ritual context:

> Haec mihi testes fidelissimi uisitantes eum, et de adipe per totum anni spatium calciamenta sua liniantes cum glorificatione Dei indicauerunt.
>
> Most trustworthy witnesses who visited him, and for the space of a whole year greased their boots with the lard, told me of these things, glorifying God.[177]

The purpose of this gift was therefore to aid the hermit's provision of hospitality. This is surely a transaction based on the theological notion of the tariff penance, an innovation in the Christian pastoral system that was first developed in Celtic tradition, and later transported to the Continent by missionaries from Ireland and Britain. Thomas O'Loughlin's study of the development of the *Penitentials* in Irish tradition argues that the payment of a penalty was not intended as punitive but as corrective.[178] The reparation paid by the ravens fits precisely into this model. The birds have committed a sin that degrades Cuthbert's ability to offer hospitality. Their penitential payment offers direct recompense, providing an object that can be used to grease the shoes of his guests. Therefore the anonymous author's vision of Cuthbert's spiritual engagement with birds adds yet another dimension to the Severus original, framing it in terms of a

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[176] *VCA* II.5, p 100-1.
[177] *VCA* II.5, p 102-3.
[178] Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology* (London: Continuum, 2000), p 48-67, especially at p 55.

penitential transaction. The conclusion is unavoidable: Cuthbert's interaction with the birds is articulated in terms of an exercise of priestly duty, a bold theological innovation that frames Cuthbert as a minister whose sacramental agency extended to all of creation.

The bowed head of the penitent following a transgression is commonly described in Christian and biblical sources, and formalised in the Rule of St Benedict.[179] However, it is important to stress that public penance was not an adjunct to a monastic rule, a document used for the internal management of a community's wayward members. Rather it was a discipline specifically designed to encompass every single person in society, as O'Loughlin writes of the first penitential text, the 6th century *Penitential of Finnian*:

> it assumes that the one judging the required penance – and there is no hint as to his status in terms of Holy Orders – will meet people from the whole of society, lay, monastic, clerical, men and women.[180]

In the innovative reworking of Anonymous, it is clear that the holy man's exercise of ministry is of relevance to the natural world, a dimension to the reorientation of creation that needs to stand alongside the rather narrower dimension of monastic regulation that other scholars have discerned in this incident.[181]

There is indeed obedience, but there is also a participatory engagement, a communion, with the saint's acts of worship and reconciliation that speaks of a sacramental ministry transformative of every creature it touches. Brooks rightly points to the way in which Bede further develops the *VCA* to stress Cuthbert's obedience to the divine office of the monastery,[182] but it is argued here that Cuthbert's wider pastoral ministry is also present in the mind of Anonymous. Monastic obedience is therefore not the only spiritual discipline that informs Cuthbert's engagement with the natural world. Furthermore, it

[179] *Regula Benedicti*, ch. 71.
[180] O'Loughlin (2000), p 52-3.
[181] Brooks (2016), p 55; Crane (2012), p 35.
[182] Brooks (2016), p 73.

will be demonstrated below that obedience is not even one of Anonymous' innovative additions to his source, because it is a topic that Severus himself stresses.

The scope of pastoral ministry described by the anonymous writer consciously takes in a much wider panorama than anything Severus imagined or learned of the monks in the eastern deserts. Details from the lives of holy men were purposely reconstituted as an exercise of actual ministry to the entirety of creation. Cuthbert's actions are presented historically verifiable fact, reported to Anonymous directly by *testes fidelissimi*, most trustworthy witnesses, who used the reparative gift of pig's lard themselves. Anonymous can be seen as something of a stepping stone between Severus and Felix, who stretches this communion between saint and animal to its limits: 'if a man is joined to God in purity of spirit, all things are united to him in God'. Between these two writers, however, stands Bede.

5.5 Bede's error in citing the *Life of St Benedict*

The anonymous author has introduced a striking new perspective in his restructuring of Severus in his account of Cuthbert and the ravens, that birds can commit a sin, *peccatum*, and receive a formal pardon from a priest through the payment of a penitential tariff. It is interesting to turn to Bede, who retains this narrative in his prose *vita* but, unsurprisingly perhaps, has some obvious reservations about Anonymous' liberal use of theological language and discipline. His revision of the interaction between Cuthbert and the ravens greatly tones down the terminology:

> sparsis lamentabiliter pennis, et summisso ad pedes eius capite, atque humiliata uoce quibus ualebat indiciis ueniam precabatur. Quod intelligens uenerabilis pater, dedit facultatem remeandi. At ille impetrata redeundi licentia, mox sodalem adducturus abiit. Nec mora redeunt ambo, et secum digna munera ferunt, dimidiam uidelicet axungiam porcinam. Quam uir Domini aduentantibus postea fratribus sepius ostendere atque ad unguendas caligas praebere solebat, contestans eis quanta hominibus oboedientiae, quanta sit cura humilitatis habenda, cum auis superbissima iniuriam quam uiro Dei intulerat, precibus, lamentis, et muneribus festinauit abluere.

> With its feathers sadly ruffled and its head drooping to its feet, and with humble cries it prayed for pardon, using such signs as it could; and the venerable father, understanding what it meant, gave it permission to return. And having got leave to come back, it soon went off in order to bring back its mate. Without delay they both returned bringing a worthy gift, namely a portion of hog's lard; and this the man of God used often afterwards to show to the brethren when they visited him, and to offer it to grease their shoes, declaring how carefully men should seek after obedience and humility, seeing that even a proud bird hastened to atone for the wrong that it had done to a man of God, by means of prayers, lamentations and gifts.[183]

Although Bede retains the structure of the narrative and the reparative nature of the gift, he removes three of the highly charged words that Anonymous employed: *peccatum* (for which he substitutes *inuriam*), *penitentiam* and *indulgens*. These last two words are also used by Severus. Yet the birds are still described as engaging in anthropological behaviour that is recognisably Christian in character, praying for pardon and expressing lamentation. Bede's earlier metrical *vita* has a brief account of the penitent ravens, and also avoids the three words omitted in his prose *vita*.[184]

Bede introduces his version of the penitent ravens with a reference to Benedict of Nursia, which is an addition to the anonymous author's text:

> Libet etiam quoddam beati Cuthberti in exemplum praefati patris Benedicti factum narrare miraculum, in quo auium oboedeintia et humilitate palam contumatia et superbia condempnatur humana.
>
> Let us also tell of a miracle wrought by the blessed Cuthbert after the example of the above-mentioned father Benedict, in which human pride and contumacy are openly condemned by the obedience and humility of birds.[185]

As Colgrave identifies, Bede is referring to an incident in which a crow carries off some poisoned bread from St Benedict, a story from the saint's *vita*, which is recorded in the second book of *Dialogi* by Gregory the Great.[186] In chapter 8, Benedict is sent a poisoned loaf by a fellow monk who is jealous of the saint's fame. Benedict is regularly

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[183] *VCP* ch. 20, p 224-5.
[184] *VCM* ll 437-9.
[185] *VCP* ch. 20, p 222-3.
[186] Colgrave (1940), p 350.

visited by a crow at dinner time, and so he instructs the bird to take the loaf and deposit it safely away from humans. The bird obeys, after some difficulty in trying to carry it. Despite Bede's attempt to identify Benedict as the inspiration for this interaction with ravens, the narrative is in fact quite different, as is the moral lesson that is drawn. The Gregorian narrative does not juxtapose the crow's behaviour with the envious monk, despite Bede's claim to the contrary, and at the end of the chapter Gregory's interlocutor says the story reminds him of Elias, summarising the lesson as a typological point about Benedict.[187]

The exact reason for Bede's misattribution to Benedict is unclear. It is a highly interesting editorial decision with two aspects to consider: did Bede consciously decide to cite Benedict instead of the desert figures of Severus, or was he simply unaware of the Severus text?

From the textual evidence alone it is not knowable for certain whether the omission was conscious. On the one hand Bede claims that Benedict is the prototype for devotional interaction with birds, but on the other hand he leaves the text sufficiently untouched that Felix can see through this erroneous attribution, and correctly identify the original source as Severus. On balance, the bibliographical evidence suggests that Bede was simply unaware of Sulpicius Severus' *Dialogi*: it is not listed by any scholar among the texts that he used, an absence that is noted in Rosalind Love's essay 'The library of the Venerable Bede'.[188] The theory was tentatively proposed above that the text might have reached Britain through Irish traditions, but it is not a particularly robust argument and further weakened by the wider context. Love argues convincingly that Bede respected

[187] *Life and Miracles of St. Benedict (Book II, Dialogues)*, trans. by Odo J. Zimmermann and Benedict R. Avery (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), p 25. The reference is to Elijah being fed by ravens in the wild (1 Kings 17:6).
[188] Rosalind Love, 'The Library of the Venerable Bede', in *The History of the Book in Britain Vol. I*, ed. by R. Gameson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp 606–32, at p 610, n. 19.

Irish scholars and hence books arising from Ireland, but acknowledges that there are contrasting scholarly opinions on this matter.[189]

Thus there remains a distant possibility that the wilderness hermits of Sulpicius Severus' *Dialogi* were unwelcome in Bede's library if the volume had been somehow associated with an Irish expression of Christianity that was out of favour. The anonymous monk of Lindisfarne shortly before Bede and Felix shortly after Bede certainly had first-hand knowledge of the text. Indeed Felix considers the lessons of Severus' *Dialogi* so well known he reverts to it by expressing surprise, in the words of Guthlac: 'have you not read...?' Is it a stretch too far to wonder if this pointed rhetorical question is aimed at Bede himself? It sounds almost like an incredulous rejoinder to Bede's erroneous insertion of Benedict into the narrative mix.

There are further reasons to think that Bede was simply unaware of Severus' first book of *Dialogi*, rather than actively choosing to cite Gregory's book in its place. Sulpicius Severus' credentials are as conventionally Catholic as possible, and it seems highly unlikely that a Roman-facing writer such as Bede would deliberately avoid one of his works, particularly given the high status accorded to Severus' *Vita sancti Martini* and other books of *Dialogi* about the same saint. Although it seems unlikely the libraries of Felix and the anonymous author of Lindisfarne were better stocked than that of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, that is the conclusion one must draw if the evidence is taken at face value. A surprising point arising from this investigation is that Felix is keen to stress the fame of Severus' text, even though the greatest writer during his lifetime did not know it.

This is to argue from silence, however. Britton Brooks provides ample positive argument for the reason why Bede chose to insert a reference to Benedict at this point in

[189] *Ibid*. p 611.

the text, building up his status as an ideal monk-pastor, and as a reformer capable of instituting lasting change. Bede concludes his *VCP* with a note that the birds remained harmoniously on the island for many years as an example of reformation, a lasting reminder of pastoral excellence in the Benedictine mould:

> the continuing efficacy of the raven miracle is not presented in order to display Cuthbert's power per se, but is instead meant to reform the disobedience of the faithful.[190]

Although Bede tones down the suggestion of sin and penitence when he reworks the anonymous *vita*, it is interesting that he too takes a patristic text, the *Vita sancti Benedicti*, and adds to it a broader claim about the relationship between nature and humans, a point that is not found in Gregory the Great's exposition on the obedient bird. Once again, a British writer adds a much greater cosmological significance to an interaction between a saint and the natural world than is present in his source material.

5.6 The function and effect of obedience

The latest critical approach to the early medieval hagiographies written in Britain has been to stress the monastic milieu in which they were written – and also read. It is unarguable that there is a considerable degree of stress placed on the need for obedience in all the primary texts that have been studied in this research, drawing greatly on the monastic notions of discipline, regulation and authority that are embedded in tales involving the intervention of holy men and women in the natural world. However, it will be argued in this section that the focus on obedience is not, in itself, a particular innovation of any of the writers in Britain. And nor, as the previous chapter has demonstrated, should the monastic milieu be considered the start and end point of all the

[190] Brooks (2016), p 155-6.

literature that was produced and consumed during the conversion era. There was a much wider impulse behind the celebration of such saintly charisma, a missionary imperative to convert, inspire and cement people into the new faith of Christianity, an impulse directed well beyond the confines of monastic enclosure to encompass not only all the people but also the whole of the landscape and seascape as well.

An exploration of the intellectual threads and theological conventions which entered Britain enables a scholar to see clearly what was inherited from sources elsewhere and what was uniquely created to suit the circumstances of the conversion of Britain. The identification of a major source text for these nature interventions, presented above, therefore provides a means of investigating this topic. The most immediate question, given current scholarship on this issue, is the extent to which the focus on monastic obedience is a key to understanding the nature interactions that feature so prominently in British literature.

From the outset, the emphasis that Severus puts on the need for obedience in the life of a monk is unmissable:

> Haut longe ab eremo contigua Nilo multa sunt monasteria. habitant uno loco plerumque centeni: quibus summum ius est, abbatis imperio uiuere, nihill suo arbitrio agere, per omnia ad nutum illius potestatemque pendere. ex his si qui maiorem uirtutem mente conceperint, ut acturi solitariam uitam se ad eremum conferant, nonnisi permittente abbate discedunt. haec illorum prima uirtus est, parere alieno imperio.[191]
>
> 'Not far from the desert, on the banks of the Nile, there are many monasteries. The monks live together, most commonly in groups of a hundred. The chief point in their polity is to live under the rule of an abbot, to do nothing by their own will, to depend in everything on his command and authority. Some among them, determined to achieve greater perfection, move to the desert to live a life of solitude, but they do not leave without the abbot's permission. For all the monks the chief virtue is to obey the order of another.[192]

[191] *CSEL* Vol 1, p 161-2.
[192] Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogues* I.10 Peebles (1949), p 173.

There are several passages in the rest of Severus' *Dialogi* which foreground this same monastic commitment in connection with the relationship between monks and elements of the natural world. These instances place a strong emphasis on the ability of a monk's total obedience to overcome challenges presented to them by their often harsh environment. Yet for all that there does not seem to be much suggestion that creation itself is demonstrating obedience in a participatory or mimetic relationship with a human. The lioness bearing a gift and the ibex sorting the poisonous roots are not given any instructions or even encouragement to help, but simply come of their own accord. Only the she-wolf offers a form of response to the hermit's bidding, who calls it over to stroke its head, but its behaviour is closely modelled on a domestic dog. Although one could argue that this particular story demonstrates 'obedience', the words *obediens* or *praeceptum* and their cognates do not feature, and the moral of the story is that the wolf instinctively recognises the mercy of Christ.

That is not to say the landscape and animals are unimportant or incidental to the stories. Severus is so aware of this other realm in which the monk's obedience can be tested he comes very close to categorising it as 'nature' in the modern sense of the term, the non-human aspects of creation. In chapter 18, Severus' interlocutor Postumianus recounts a story set in a strict monastery in Egypt, a place which he does not name but which he has visited on his journeys. In the story a man once approached the abbot and asked to join the monastery, claiming that he had no problem with the level of discipline required. The abbot responded by instructing the would-be monk to enter a burning bread oven:

> nec distulit parere praecepto: medias flammas nihil cunctatus ingreditur, quae mox tam audaci fide uictae uelut illis quondam Hebraeis pueris cessere uenienti. superata natura est, fugit incendium: et qui putabatur arsurus, uelut frigido rore perfusus se ipse miratus est.[193]

[193] *CSEL* Vol. 1, p 171.

> The disciple instantly obeyed the command, entering unhesitatingly into the midst of the flames. So bold a faith could not be withstood. At his coming, the flames immediately receded, as they had long ago in the case of the Hebrew boys. In the retreat of the flames, nature itself was conquered. It had been thought that the candidate would be burned; instead, he came out, to his own surprise, moistened, as it were, with a cooling dew.[194]

The use of the term *natura* in this text is an interesting aside, because it suggests there was a rare usage of the noun that maps more closely on to the modern meaning of the term. It is possible that the word is used in this instance to refer to the 'nature' of fire in terms of its intrinsic characteristics, rather than conceiving of fire as a part of a larger category of 'nature' in the modern sense, but the grammar itself indicates otherwise, since *natura* and *incendium* have different verbs.

Returning the theme of obedience, it is notable that Severus does not make any direct connection made between the novice's obedience to the abbot and the behaviour of the fire in subsiding miraculously: the fire is neither commanded by nor obeys the would-be monk, but is overcome (*superata*) by him. Obedience has an effect on the monk's interaction with fire, but there is no mimetic participation of the flames themselves within the Christian hierarchy.

In the second story which illustrates obedience, the same conclusion can be drawn: another new monk is required to water a dry twig that the abbot pushes into the ground. He labours for two years, despite being weakened by a long daily walk to the river Nile for water, until the twig finally starts to show signs of life in the third year:

> ego ipsam ex illa uirgula arbusculam uidi, quae hodieque in atrio monasterii ramis uirentibus quasi in testimonium manens, quantum oboedientia meruerit et quantum fides possit, ostendit[195]
>
> I have myself seen the shrub that grew from it. With its branches flourishing, it stands today in the court of the monastery, an abiding witness to the merits of obedience and the power of faith.[196]

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[194] Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogues* I.18. Peebles (1949), p 186.
[195] *CSEL* Vol. 1 p 171-2.
[196] Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogues* I.19. Peebles (1949), p 187.

The principle of monastic obedience is therefore amply illustrated in Sulpicius Severus' text, explicitly described as the chief virtue of monks and demonstrated in numerous narratives. The conclusion therefore is that obedience *per se* is not an original narrative theme when it appears in the texts written in Britain, since Severus presents several narratives to demonstrate its operation and its positive effects. To focus on the theme of obedience alone in British texts, to consider it as the primary preoccupation of the authors, therefore needs to be interrogated alongside source material that puts just as much emphasis on this same theme. Severus does build up a heightened sense of engagement with the environment, providing one of the crucial building blocks for the subsequent development of a ritual engagement with the natural realm seen in British texts, but the virtue of obedience itself is attributed to humans.

The working and re-working of Sulpicius Severus' rich and evocative wilderness material exists in at least three iterations in early Christian literature from Britain. It is not particularly remarkable therefore to find so many common elements, since this text has proved to be a key connection between the hermits of the desert and the monastic pioneers of Britain. But it is misleading to read the early British texts and conclude that this emphasis on monastic discipline is of primary significance, because that emphasis is there in the source text. Indeed it permeates the entire culture of the monastery and literature arising from it throughout the early Christian world. If anything about nature rituals can be regarded as a hagiographical topos, of limited value for interrogating the unique circumstances of early medieval Britain, surely it is this highly derivative theme of obedience.

Through a close examination of the primary material with which Anonymous and Felix built their accounts, it becomes apparent what are the original elements in their hagiographies. In the British texts, a new emphasis is added, one that promotes the role of the human in pivoting the natural world towards God. The British writers went

beyond the emphasis on obedience into a narrative that took in the entirety of creation, flooding over the monastic boundary into every part of the surrounding environment.

With an understanding of the missionary context presented in chapter 4, it can be argued this was deliberately shaped in order to capture the imagination of a sceptical population: the new Christian message was articulated in terms of the human effect on nature and the way in which nature mirrors that back on humans. What is innovative is the notion that the imposition of order through the charisma of a holy man or woman was expressed in cosmological terms, encompassing the whole of creation. This seems to be unique in terms of Christian literature of this period, and consistent across all three writers from Britain who are examined here:

- Anonymous describes ravens as committing a sin and taking part in a structured penitential exercise
- Bede moderates the language of sin when he reworks Anonymous, but then creates a theological justification for ritual interaction with nature, citing Genesis
- Felix repeats Bede's theological formula and then amplifies it further to speak of a union between humans and nature.

At this point it is possible to propose a significant conclusion about Bede's theological formula regarding the relationship between holy humans and the natural world, and hence Felix's subsequent amplification of the same theme. It has become clear that the narrative on which Bede's formula is built, the penitent ravens, is itself a unique creation formed out of a radical reworking of material by Anonymous. Thus the search for any direct precedent for Bede's formula in patristic texts, ably conducted by Brooks but without any discovery of a precise match, can be abandoned. Bede and after him Felix have introduced and extended a new theological concept in Christian culture based on the creative work of a Northumbrian monk and the milieu in which he lived.

The text by Anonymous is relatively overshadowed by Bede's version but it appears to lay the groundwork for an extraordinary chain of invention and reinvention in a British context, a theological understanding of the ministry of humans as extending to all of creation, formulated into a theological statement by Bede and finding full expression in the work of Felix.

5.7 Missionary engagement with the crow family

Previous segments of research suggest that the concern of British writers was to create a narrative that was compelling for the majority of the population, and the research in this chapter clearly connects with this developing narrative explanation. The changes wrought in the natural world by the actions of holy men are cosmological in scale, but also appear to be targeted at certain aspects of creation. Specifically in this case there is a long and sustained attempt to absorb the significance of the *corvus* or *cornix* into the Christian orbit, first seen in the previous chapter examining the incident with the croaking crow in the Whitby *VGM*. It seems certain that there was a particular cluster of spiritual beliefs or at least superstitions regarding birds of the crow family.[197]

A further indication of the negative associations with these birds is found in Bede's commentary on Genesis, describing the *corvus* which Noah first sent from the ark as a symbol of a wayward spirit, used by Bede to criticise the restlessness of certain members of monastic orders. As he describes the symbolism of the raven's failure to return to the ark, even the bird's colour provides Bede with a spiritual metaphor:

> Cuius egressui atque itineri recte comparantur hi qui sacramentis quidem celestibus institui atque imbuti sunt, nec tamen nigredinem terrenae oblectationis exuentes, lata potius mundi itinera quam ecclesiasticae conuersationis claustra diligunt.

[197] The crow, raven and jackdaw are all classified as *Corvus* genus: Mark Beaman, *The Handbook of Bird Identification: For Europe and the Western Palearctic* (London: Christopher Helm Publishers Ltd, 1998), p 744-52.

> Rightly compared to this departure and journeying are those people who have been instructed and imbued in the divine sacraments indeed, but nevertheless not laying aside the blackness of earthly delight, love the wide journeyings of the world more than the enclosures of the Christian way of life.[198]

The Vulgate bible and the Old Latin bible differ as to whether the raven did or did not return to the ark, the Old Latin using the phrase *non est reversus*. The *Codex Amiatinus*, the complete edition of the Vulgate produced at Monkwearmouth Jarrow during Bede's lifetime, makes a highly unusual deviation from Jerome's text at this point to prefer the Old Latin, further suggesting that Bede or a member of his community could not miss an opportunity to further denigrate this bird's character.[199]

One way of dealing with the troublesome bird and its cultural associations was simply to shoot it down, the action described by the author of the *VGM*. This was not however a practical solution for dealing with every other bird of ill omen, and it is perhaps no wonder Bede preferred to shift the bird species to a sparrow in his own account of the conversion of king Edwin's people.

The anonymous author of Lindisfarne presents a different approach to this interface between the pre-Christian associations of the crow family and the missionaries, describing its rehabilitation through the penitential ministry of Cuthbert. If an animal with such negative connotations as a raven can be reconciled, surely that is proof that the Christian claims of a universal God of all creation are true, proof that operates at a popular level of belief. The ultimate purpose of this incident with the penitent ravens is not a didactic lesson for monks to obey, but the creation of a new overarching Christian narrative that celebrates the all-pervading charisma of a holy man, one that acknowledges existing pre-Christian beliefs but also out-narrates them.

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[198] Bede: *In Gen.* book 2, 8:6-7. *CCSL* 118A, p 123, trans. Kendall (2008) p 193-4.
[199] Janina Ramirez, *Power, Passion and Politics in Anglo-Saxon England: The Private Lives of the Saints* (London: WH Allen, 2015), p 238-9.

The anonymous author may lack the sophisticated and explicit theological explanation for nature rituals that Bede and after him Felix develop around the core narratives, but this close examination of his reworking of the source text reveals a remarkable cosmological theology at work. The exercise of Cuthbert's ministry is directed at nature as much as it is at humans: the birds and men are on a level before the saint not just in moral terms but in pastoral terms as well. This is a truly remarkable theological viewpoint, and one that is entirely absent in the raw materials from which the anonymous author constructed his tale.

5.8 Towards a theology of nature interventions

Reconstructing the reception history of Sulpicius Severus' narratives in British texts demonstrates that missionary work clustered around certain core themes that are not present in the original. This understanding offers an alternative perspective to the intense interventions in nature seen in the hagiographies studied here, in the absence of which scholars have tended to interpret human/animal interaction as an allegory for human relationships. Susan Crane concludes that the penitent raven incident is part of a matrix of interactions designed to celebrate the saint's provision of hospitality to monastic visitors. She places Cuthbert's reconciliation with the ravens alongside another interaction that will be studied extensively in chapters 7 and 8, an incident in which some sea creatures come to dry Cuthbert's feet after his devotional bathing at Coldingham:

> Once again, the forms of hospitality express animals' relations to the saint: offering lard for waterproofing the guests' boots is an extension of drying and warming the guests' feet.[200]

Thus the conclusion of the research presented above is a significant divergence from previous scholarly interpretation, and a useful rehearsal for themes that will be met

[200] Crane (2012), p 35.

again in the interaction between missionary saints and natural bodies of water. Cuthbert's outreach of ministry to the natural world fits into a much larger ritual framework in which popular cultural preoccupations can be discerned.

Bede the theologian crystallises the implications of this redeemed relationship between humans and the physical world with his theological formula, which is much more explicit than any exegesis found in the *VCA*. But as the investigation above into the anonymous author's own editorial changes and additions indicates, Bede is perhaps not quite as innovative as first appears. He is, rather, reflecting something that appears to be indigenous to the Christian culture in Britain. Whereas Severus' anecdotes are closer to a parable, recording the lessons to be found in the natural world, in Britain there appears to be an actual physical agency that describes humanity as a priesthood operating on and with all creation. Something new emerged in the way all Christian activity – monastic obedience, penitential reconciliation, and devotional bathing in natural water – could effect participatory change in the natural world, in ways that are absent from the original source texts.

It is particularly notable that Bede's theological formula does not say that creation should obey a holy man but *minister* to him: this is a sacramental and ritual relationship. The holy man is here presented as a natural leader, in every sense of the phrase. Brooks describes Cuthbert's interactions on the Northumbrian coastline in terms of miracle,[201] but it is not at all clear that Bede considers it any more a miracle for animals to take part in a formal act of Christian devotion than he would when describing a human being doing the same thing.

Themes of nature interaction are adapted by British writers and used to demonstrate that the whole of creation is primed to take part in Christian worship: ravens undergo formal

[201] Brooks (2016), *passim*, introduced on p 12-18.

penance, birds enter a hermit's hut to sing songs of joy, sea creatures minister to the holy man, and all are ultimately 'united' with him. It is this innovation that differentiates all three texts written in Britain from the source materials produced by Severus and Gregory the Great. In these, their use of nature symbolism places an emphasis on the *typological*: the natural world reveals the holiness of the subjects as types that point towards Christ (Sulpicius Severus) or Elijah (Gregory the Great). Nature is not a participant in their work but a pointer, a revelatory device. By way of contrast, even so cautious a theologian as Bede posits an entirely different and much grander claim.

Such a broad vision of reconciliation is itself not entirely without precedent in Christian theology, reflecting conceptions about the cosmological nature of the atonement in the early medieval period described in chapter 3. But what seems entirely unprecedented in the British texts is the notion that a devout Christian can effect just such a reconciliation himself through a sacramental outreach, the actions of a holy man precipitating a chain of mimetic worship that unfurls through the whole of creation. It is as if humans serve as a priesthood to their fellow creatures, extending sacramental ministry far beyond the narrow concerns of human sin to reconcile the entire cosmos to God. Of scholars to examine this topic, Brooks has brushed against just such an idea, although he does not explore the precise ritual mechanisms that precipitated and then embodied it:

> the VCA explores the nature of Cuthbert's ability to reorient Creation by means of obedience, focusing on the fundamental moment of disobedience at the Fall; by Cuthbert's radical saintly obedience, restoring for a moment humanity's rightful space in the divine hierarchy, the world can be re-made.[202]

It is only by finding and examining one of the major source texts that one can see how three writers in Britain variously propose and develop a theology that is not in the original. Without this insight, Bede's dominance as a theologian would have continued to obscure this crucial point. This nature-orientated theology and practice had a life in

[202] Brooks (2016), p 11.

Britain independent of Bede's formulation, predating his work in the anonymous *VCA* and undergoing further development in Felix's writings. These last two writers were based in different parts of Britain, anonymous a monk of the Ionan foundation Lindisfarne in Northumbria and Felix, almost certainly an Anglo-Saxon monk based in East Anglia, whose subject Guthlac was a Mercian. Colgrave goes so far as to claim that Felix was "not influenced by the Celtic tradition", so far removed are his terms of reference from the Irish sphere.[203]

Both Anglo-Saxon and indigenous British and Irish communities alike appear to have nurtured a form of Christianity that placed great emphasis on an intense ritual interaction with nature. The reworking of Severus' text in the hands of the three authors studied here contradicts any conventional scholarly delineation between Celtic and Anglo-Saxon cultures, at least in terms of their spiritual interest in the natural world. It also makes it just as difficult to recast such a sensibility in terms of 'Atlantic' or 'western' forms of Christianity, since all three writers come from the eastern side of Britain. The landscape and its creatures appear to have served as a much broader canvas on which Christians from different parts of the island of Britain attempted to depict their religion in ways that would resonate with the human inhabitants.

Furthermore, the foundational role of Sulpicius Severus' text in creating some of the material from which such intense ritual and theology were constructed should not be overlooked. A finding of this segment of research is that the Christian culture in Britain during the conversion era was shaped to some extent by artefacts of the conversion era in Gaul, when Christianity was inculturated into a largely rural population in ways that have certain similarities with the situation in Britain and Ireland.

[203] Colgrave (2007), p 15-6.

It is not necessary to explore the conversion of Gaul itself in order to understand the trajectory of Christian thought in Britain and the role of the holy man and woman in embodying it, because it is clear that the British writers added new dimensions to this material. Existing Christian theology and narratives were taken into Britain and remoulded to fit the new mental and physical landscapes that the missionaries encountered. Hagiographers always tend to copy, but with the rich material arising from Gaul, they have created anew.

As has been seen here, animals and particularly birds, chief among whom was the raven, were targeted by new applications of Christian thought and ritual. This was by no means the culmination of the process, since the reinvention of Christian ritual as an agent of cosmological change appears to have reached its apogee in a mission directed towards natural bodies of water, as will be examined next.

CHAPTER 6

Ritual interaction with water: asceticism, exorcism, and the challenge to pre-Christian attitudes

The embrace of outdoor bathing rituals appears to have found notable cultural resonance in the cold waters of the British and Irish islands during the first millennium. As will be seen, these rituals converged on natural bodies of water already awash with an array of popular and cultic associations, striking enough in their intensity to survive in the limited historical records of the conversion period. As seen in previous chapters, the way that an incoming Christian culture chose to embody and promote its beliefs can be understood as part of a missionary interface that contains within it evidence of the arena and the terms in which Christian and pre-Christian concepts were evaluated. An indigenous expression of the new faith was articulated in terms that existing tribal cultures could not only understand but could relate to their past and current perceptions of their environment. It is clear from an overview of historical accounts of devotional bathing that natural water was one of the primary sites of early Christian ritual practice. Appendix A lists 50 of such devotional bathing rituals, 23 in Britain, 16 in Ireland, 4 in eastern Christendom and 7 in the rest of northern Europe.

Bathing is not the only way in which early hagiographies record the ritual interaction between humans and water. Another idiosyncratic practice in early medieval Britain merits study alongside immersion rituals: the blessing and exorcism of natural bodies of water in a variety of discernibly formulaic rituals, up to and including the application of consecrated oil on the sea. As will be seen, systematic study locates the origins of this ritual in one specific form of baptismal practice that was introduced in the late 4th century by St Ambrose. The use of such exorcistic ritual in the landscape has not been studied in detail or held up as a contemporary context for understanding the more eye-

catching immersion rituals. Both of these are devotional actions in which the natural world is not merely a backdrop but a participant, and were at times combined in a ritual immersion that transformed the landscape itself. This and the next chapter bring bathing and exorcism together in a contextualised study of the meaning and agency of devotional activity performed in and around the seas, lakes, rivers and springs of Britain.

As noted in chapters 1 and 3, very little overt information survives about attempts to convert people in Britain during and after the Roman era. Yet there is one specific area of missionary activity to native British people that is relatively well recorded in the early texts about Britain, which is the prolonged campaign to convert the Picts to Christianity. It is difficult to gauge how far the Picts preserved aspects of insular culture and mythologies about the landscape that were commonly held by Iron Age peoples across Britain, but it is at least safe to argue that they were less heavily influenced by Roman imperial rule than those living in the rest of the island at the point when they first encountered Christianity. Whether the findings of this research into northern Britain can be used to shed light on the challenges that missionaries faced in other parts of the island is difficult to quantify, but there are indications that certain aspects of indigenous culture required a considerable degree of resourcefulness and adaptation by missionaries beyond the blurred boundaries of Pictland.

Much more information is recorded about the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms than the rest of the tribal groupings living in Britain. As described, the historical record suggests that cultural transition was largely negotiated at meetings, a series of missionary encounters that perhaps expresses some of the anxieties felt around tribal security and the threats of warfare. When it comes to the conversion of the mostly anonymous majority, it would appear that there were other anxieties for the missionaries to contend with. As will be seen in evidence from northern Britain, this study

demonstrates a tactical missionary pivot around the spiritual energies of water and of aquatic creatures, one that required an urgent and creative recourse to the rituals and theology of baptism. Such a cosmological reach stretched Christianity to new and idiosyncratic expressions of faith as it engaged with a landscape teeming with strange and hostile creatures, human and non-human alike.

6.1 The origins of cold-water bathing for religious purposes

The topic of ascetic or devotional bathing in Christian tradition has received limited attention from scholars of the early church since it was discussed in a chapter in Louis Gougaud's study *Devotional and Ascetic Practices in the Middle Ages*, a seminal work for modern scholarship into Celtic Christianity.[204] He began his study by identifying the practice of cold-water bathing as a particularly Celtic expression of belief, and emphatically and exclusively categorises its purpose as bodily chastisement. He also casts doubt on the physical practicality of such devotions:

> Mortification by immersions in cold water was notably in favour among ascetics in the Celtic countries, in Ireland, Wales and elsewhere. They were not, however, the only people to practise this form of maceration... As, however, certain examples of this kind of mortification seem more or less improbable, it will be necessary to try and determine, as far as possible, what degree of credence can be given to the writers who relate them.[205]

Taken uncritically, therefore, Gougaud appears to remove these activities from the research area of this thesis, which is the interaction between people and the landscape as an expression of Christian mission. He categorises them as part of the 'ascetic' rather than the more general 'devotional' practices referred to in his book's title. In this research, the term 'ascetic' will be used for bathing that appears to be concerned with mortification of the flesh, chilling the body to a point of incapacity and discomfort. But for more general discussion of the phenomenon of ritualised or spiritually significant

[204] Louis Gougaud, *Devotional and Ascetic Practices in the Middle Ages* (London: Burns Oates, 1927).
[205] *Ibid*. p 159.

outdoor immersion the umbrella term 'devotional' is preferred, to describe an act that can express one of several different forms of dedication and piety.

The brief introductory discussion that follows here raises issues that will be echoed in the more extensive descriptions of devotional bathing that form the majority of this study, and also serves to highlight ways in which the practice in Britain developed a distinctive emphasis that Gougaud does not discern in his eastern prototype. As will be seen, devotional bathing can be examined in the context of other British and Irish ritual interaction with bodies of natural water, particularly exorcism, which also appears to have developed a distinctive and intense function in the early church during the conversion era.

Gougaud identifies the first-known incident of ascetic bathing in a Christian context as that of the theologian monk Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399), who immersed himself in a well at night around the year 382, at the network of monastic cells in Nitria (modern-day Egypt). As the first recorded example of such practice, Evagrius' embrace of cold-water bathing merits individual examination before embarking on a study of the ascetic bathing practices in early medieval Britain, not least because scholars continue to follow Gougaud's reading.

Evagrius' act is described briefly but with attention to the physicality of the procedure. Perhaps significantly for this research, its reception history as a record of Christian ritual action demonstrates a degree of discomfort about the centrality of the body in a saint's expression of faith. This highlights again the pitfalls of trying to understand earlier attitudes through a modern set of preconceptions, in ways comparable to the discussion in chapter 2 about the use of the term 'nature' as a category in early medieval thought. This brief introductory study will therefore help to determine the suitability or otherwise of Gougaud's use of this incident as a filter through which to view Celtic

material, and reveal some of the challenges that it presents to a modern set of preconceptions about Christian piety.

The account of Evagrius' bathing appears in the *Historia Lausiaca*, a Greek text dating from around 420[206] that was almost certainly written by his disciple Palladius.[207] The English translation of Gougaud's pioneering study quotes from Butler's 1898 translation of the *Historia Lausiaca*:

> the devil of lewdness tempted him so grievously, as he himself avowed, that each night he stood naked in a well (it was in winter), so much so that his flesh became quite numbed[208]

In contrast to two more recent scholarly translations, this unduly emphasises the frequency of the activity ("each night"). The most recent English translation by Robert T. Meyer (1965) renders the Greek as:

> The demon of fornication bothered him so oppressively, as he himself told us, that he stood naked throughout the night in a well. It was winter at the time and his flesh froze.[209]

A Coptic *Life* of Evagrius Ponticus is now recognised by modern scholars as an earlier work by the same author Palladius, a longer version that he compiled with three other saints' *Lives*.[210] This Coptic version of the incident is translated by Vivian (2005) as follows:

> One time the demons so increased in him the desire for fornication that he thought in his heart that God had abandoned him, as he told us, and he spent the whole

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[206] According to Lapidge (2008), p 146, the only trace of this book's presence in medieval Britain is a late record in a library inventory associated with Peterborough.
[207] William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), at p 307 for discussion of Palladius' personal connection to Evagrius.
[208] *The Lausiac History of Palladius, Introduction and Text*, ed. by Cuthbert Butler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898), p 38.
[209] *The Lausiac History, Ancient Christian Writers 34*, ed. by Robert T. Meyer (New York: Paulist Press, 1965), p 113.
[210] Harmless (2004), p 305, accepts 20th century scholarship identifying Palladius as the likely author of this longer Coptic material about Evagrius, perhaps a first draft of his *Lausiac History*.

> night standing naked and praying in the cistern of water in winter until his flesh became as hard as rock.[211]

In the Coptic text it is unambiguous that Evagrius' ascetic bathing was a one-off event, rather than a ritual subject to formulaic repetition. This is perhaps a minor point considering the context of a hagiographical text: if a holy man or woman performed a devotional act it carried with it a notion of exemplary behaviour. A separate and perhaps more significant point about the way this incident has been received as a record of Christian devotion can be seen by comparing a 19th century translation of the *Lausiac History*. The *Patrologia Graeca* edition of the text, published in 1860, has a Latin translation in parallel that indicates the incident took place on one night. However another editorial alteration is introduced by the removal of the word naked (emphasis added):

> Τούτω ὤχλησέ ποτε εἰς βάρος ὁ τῆς πορνείας δαίμων, ὡς αὐτὸς ἡμῖν διηγεῖτο, καὶ διὰ πάσης νυκτὸς **γυμνὸς** ἔστη ἐν τῷ φρέατι, χειμῶνος ὄντος, ὡς παγῆναι αὐτοῦ τὰς σάρκας[212]

> Ei aliquando gravem exhibuit molestiam dæmon fornicationis, ut ipse nobis narravit; et tota nocte stetit in puteo cum esset hiems, adeo ut ejus carnes gelu constringerentur.[213]

The original Greek includes the word *γυμνός*, naked, a detail also found in the Coptic version reproduced above. This is an omission that occurs in some other translations and summaries of this incident.[214] This might seem a minor point, but the tendency to remove or downplay the centrality of the body in a Christian ritual is surprisingly persistent among historians and scholars from the earliest writers of the British church all the way to scholars in the 21st century, as will become apparent.

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[211] *Four Desert Fathers: Pambo, Evagrius, Macarius of Egypt, and Macarius of Alexandria, Coptic Texts Relating to the Lausiac History of Palladius Popular Patristics Series*, ed. by Tim Vivian (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), par. 22.
[212] *P.G.* XXXIV 1194B, ch. 86.
[213] *P.G.* XXXIV 1192B.
[214] Augustine Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (London: Routledge, 2006), p 13.

There is no evidence that either of Palladius' texts were known in early medieval Britain directly, but Evagrius Ponticus' theology greatly influenced John Cassian, who introduced much eastern monastic practice into Europe.[215]

Because this appears to be the first recorded incident of devotional bathing, the details are important enough to compare these different versions. It seems robust to conclude that Evagrius is described as immersing himself naked on one occasion at night in some sort of cistern or well, therefore by implication outdoors rather than in any sort of domestic or public bath. At this point it is worth noting that the body of water itself plays only a perfunctory role in the performance of this ritual. As will be seen, this fact alone provides a significant point of contrast to several of the earliest recorded incidents of devotional bathing in Britain. Evagrius' well or cistern appears to be entirely unaltered at the end of the saint's nocturnal vigil, and as a man-made container could not be classified as part of the natural world. That is not to say all British and Irish bathing devotions provoke a material change in the environment, but many of them appear to be performed for precisely that purpose, as will be seen.

Although the Latin text does not go so far as to clothe Evagrius, it does discreetly obscure our view of his bathing. We can only guess at the reasons why a translator in the 19th century felt the need to remove the saint's bodily presence from the scene, but it seems reasonable to conclude it has something to do with embarrassment.

The detail of Evagrius' nakedness can not be dismissed as entirely mundane or trivial. For one thing, it bears a cultural charge in the 19th century substantial enough to spur a translator into an act of censorship. As part of a ritual activity too, such details can be significant: the original texts demonstrate a need to refer to Evagrius' nakedness, even at

[215] Stephen D. Driver, *John Cassian and the Reading of Egyptian Monastic Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), *passim* and esp. p 11-12.

a time when 'bathing naked' might be regarded as a tautology.[216] This raises the question whether Palladius' description can be contextualised in terms of any other cultural expressions of Christian devotion during the time of Evagrius. The most obvious ritual is baptism, as will be examined further in this research, but it could also be argued that there is a penitential aspect to this ritual when considered in the context of the rest of Evagrius' life. Before escaping to the desert Evagrius had led a voluptuous life. Both the Greek and Coptic versions describe his joy at parading around town in fine clothes and his falling in love with a married woman of high rank. The desert provided a means of escape from such indulgences, his romantic inclinations countered by his attempts to subdue the flesh, and his taste in expensive clothes countered by ascetic nakedness. The overall point is that details such as bodily nakedness can bear a spiritual meaning that modern scholars have at times found difficult to acknowledge. Such awkwardness over the embodied reality of bathing rituals is worth highlighting at the outset of this study, because echoes of inhibition and embarrassment can also be discerned through careful study of the early medieval accounts of both bathing and baptism. Gougaud himself fails to identify either baptism or the rejection of fashion as contexts in which to place Evagrius' bathing. He does acknowledge the saint's nakedness, but interprets the overall ritual entirely as an act of mortification.

A final point of discussion about Gougaud's study is his sceptical description of bathing activity as 'improbable'. A search through Gougaud's 42 examples from the Late Antiquity and the middle ages yields just a single example from the 13th century which could be considered impossible, that of Christina Mirabilis (d. *c.* 1224), who supposedly stood in the river Meuse in winter for up to six days at a time, only emerging at the

[216] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p 315-7.

imprecations of her local priest.[217] Most of the aquatic devotions recorded by Gougaud and compiled in this research are relatively tame compared to numerous feats and miracles recorded in many hagiographies. Perhaps to religiously inspired authors such as Gougaud, such activity falls outside what is acceptable to a post-medieval understanding of Christian behaviour if one assumes that 'improbable' means 'morally unlikely' rather than 'physically unlikely'. However, such a modern inhibition should not be projected back on to the culture of the early church without question in academic inquiry – and as this research will indicate it can not be deduced either. Nearly all the early devotions described by Gougaud could be re-enacted in identical manner today, in the same locations where identifiable. Immersion is a ritual stripped down to the bare essentials, without liturgy, vestment, ornamentation or human artefact of any description. It is the most intense and immersive interaction with natural water possible, a full-bodied embrace of the elements that is primal in its simplicity and timelessness. Yet for all that it remains curiously freighted with cultural baggage.

This research attempts to investigate such devotions on their own terms, rather than in terms of historians' reaction to them. Gougaud's obvious reservations about such full-bodied Christian ritual as immersion serves as a useful reminder that the body is a point where cultural and religious anxiety is deeply held and acutely expressed.

Following Gougaud's classification of devotional bathing as asceticism, after Evagrius' prototype, the few scholars who have studied this ritual behaviour in the *Lives* of early saints have mostly concluded that it is about mortification, about subduing the flesh, about ensuring sexual abstinence and thus demonstrating the virtues of self-control. In a brief journal article, Wilfrid Bonser (1937) compiles a number of examples of saints

[217] Thomas of Cantimpré 'The Life of St Christine the Astonishing', ch. 7 in *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality*, ed. by Elizabeth Spearing (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

praying while immersed in water and although he does not cite Gougaud, his only conclusion is that this "was one of the more extreme ascetic traits in vogue among Celtic saints."[218]

Michael Herity considers a range of reasons why so many hermitages in Ireland and northern Britain were located alongside small lakes, ponds and water courses, including functions such as water-mills and agriculture. He then speculates that this might also be evidence for the widespread practice of cold-water bathing, which he describes in terms of mortification:

> It appears that it was the custom for many of the Irish saints to mortify themselves by immersing themselves in cold water.[219]

In an article published in 1997 Colin Ireland cites Gougaud's study, and traces the practice of cold-water bathing among British saints back to Irish penitential practice, which in turn was inspired by examples from the Near East.[220] Like Gougaud, Ireland highlights the aspect of bodily mortification, but acknowledges that this is not the only context in which to understand ascetic bathing:

> Immersion in water was usually practised as a way of crushing desire and 'humiliating the body' – a precursor of the cold shower. It is often found in a penitential context, although not exclusively so... Chanting or singing of psalms is frequently found in conjunction both with immersion and with cross-vigils, the practice of holding the arms outstretched during devotions.[221]

Ireland cites no specific examples of such a combination of cross-vigils and bathing, even though he describes them as "frequently found". Research conducted into other

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[218] Wilfrid Bonser, 'Praying in Water', *Folklore*, 48.4 (1937), pp 385-88, at p 385.
[219] Michael Herity, 'Early Irish Hermitages', in Bonner et al. (1989), pp 45–63, at p 52.
[220] No direct route of transmission from the eastern deserts to western Europe is offered for this claim, and a survey of the surviving literature has only produced a hint at the concept in John Cassian's *Conferences*, a passage described above, chapter 5, in which Cassian recommends bodily nakedness (*corporis nuditatem*) as part of the discipline of the hermit (*Conlatio* 1.7). Later in the same work, Cassian approvingly cites Paul's comment in 2 Corinthians 11:27 "I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." (*Conlatio* 24.23).
[221] Colin Ireland, 'Penance and Prayer in Water: An Irish Practice in Northumbrian Hagiography', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 34 (1997), pp 51-66, at p 52.

scholarly literature has not uncovered any specific citations from any early texts to illustrate that this was a recognised Celtic practice, even though it is now commonly accepted by scholars as established historical fact.[222] Gougaud's book examines both ascetic bathing and attitudes for prayer in separate chapters, and although he identifies six Irish references to the *crossfigell* ('the vigil of the cross') posture, nowhere does he describe any saint combining this ascetic practice with immersion, standing in a body of water with arms outstretched. That is not to say the notion is invalid, even though it does not explicitly appear in any early hagiographical descriptions. Detailed examination of the evidence regarding immersion rituals does produce evidence of just such a crucifixion posture, as will be established in chapter 7, but this requires a degree of analysis not presented elsewhere. It would be interesting to know how scholars have reached this conclusion.

Ireland describes the most celebrated hagiographical incident of bathing, St Cuthbert's immersion in the sea at Coldingham after which sea creatures come to warm his feet, as an example of this Irish penitential practice.[223] This incident will be discussed in detail below, but as mentioned there is a significant point of variance from the supposed Egyptian prototype of mortification to be found in Cuthbert's bathing ritual – and in certain other British bathing rituals – which is the active participation of the landscape. The anonymous monk of Lindisfarne and with even more intensity Bede describe this event in their *vitae* of Cuthbert as a participatory engagement with the sea and its creatures, suggesting that both the saint and his environment form some sort of

[222] For example: Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p 77; also *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, ed. by William M. Johnston (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p 266 refers to the "Celtic ascetic practice of cross vigil (standing at night in water with arms outstretched), which is modelled on Evagrius Ponticus", but cites only the *Historia Lausiaca* rather than any supposed Celtic examples.

[223] *VCA* II.3; *VCP* ch. 10.

relationship through the encounter. This dimension is lacking in any of the parallels that can be found in ascetic bathing practices in eastern Christianity. In a northern British context, however, there is considerable precedent for just such a two-way interaction with creation, as will be discussed in relation to Columba and his many interactions with the rivers, lochs, springs and seas in and around Pictland.

6.2 Other contexts for devotional bathing: healing, baptism and exorcism

Care is therefore required over Gougaud's identification of cold-water bathing as belonging to a category of ascetic discipline. This is particularly true because there is another form of bathing in the early church that has little to do with asceticism: its use as a medium for healing, for which there is biblical precedent in the shape of the well at Bethesda (John 5:1-7). Evagrius' own immersion could also be viewed through just such a filter of immersion as healing, since it cures him of 'the devil of lewdness' that afflicts his body. A third, highly charged form of ritual bathing is of course baptismal, the ritual introduced by John the Baptist in the river Jordan and in a pool at Aenon (John 3:23).

Gougaud claims that Evagrius' immersion in his well is the only known example of such ascetic activity recorded the *Lives of the Fathers of the Desert*, which might be true depending on how one defines the concept of ascetic immersion. There are other examples of bathing in holy water recorded in these *Lives*, as well as use of a sacred bathing pool recorded by Egeria, the pilgrim writer of the 4th century. These other forms of early Christian bathing ritual also create a cultural context of relevance to the Celtic practices that Gougaud has collated. Bathing for curative purposes is one such discipline, but as will be seen the rituals and theology of baptism were an even deeper well from which early Christians could draw.

Regarding specific examples of devotional bathing, Egeria describes how monks would gather at the same pool at Aenon which John the Baptist had used for baptism:

> Habebat autem ante se ipse fons quasi lacum, ubi parebat fuisse operatum sanctum Iohannem baptistam. Tunc dixit nobis ipse sanctus presbyter: "in hodie hic hortus aliter non appellatur Graeco sermone nisi khpou tou agiou Iohanni, id est quod vos dicitis Latine hortus sancti Iohannis". Nam et multi fratres sancti monachi de diversis locis venientes tendunt se, ut laventur in eo loco.[224]
>
> The spring had in front of it a sort of pool, where it appears that S. John the Baptist fulfilled his ministry. Then the holy priest said to us: "This garden is called nothing else to this day than *cepos tu agiu iohannu* in the Greek language, or as you say in Latin, *hortus sancti Johannis*. Many brethren, holy monks, direct their steps hither from various places that they may wash there."[225]

Egeria's pilgrimage took place around 381-384, which overlaps with the date of Evagrius' bathing activity in 382. Her account does not provide enough detail to determine why the monks chose to bathe in the pool, but mortification seems unlikely given Egeria's use of the verb *lavare* (to wash). Whatever their objective, the monks were clearly gathering at this particular body of water because of the pool's baptismal history, which at the very least added a spiritual dimension to the mundane purpose of physically washing away dirt.

Other early examples of devotional bathing recorded in the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* include Mary of Egypt washing her hands and face in the holy water of the river Jordan before spending 47 years wandering the desert with just three loaves of bread for sustenance, and naked after her clothes fell to pieces. Mary's life generally is an ascetic response to her previous life as a prostitute in Alexandria, and once again her actual bathing ritual is one of the most simple and plausible details in a life of extremes. It is not described in terms of mortification, although the context is certainly similar to that of Evagrius' bathing ritual, marking an end to a life she considered immoral and indulgent. It is an example of a bathing ritual which might be classified as mortification, but perhaps is better understood more generally as a physical act that is intended to

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[224] *Silviae vel potius Aetheriae peregrinatio ad loca sancta*, ed. by W. Heraeus (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1908), 1.15.3, p 17.
[225] *The Pilgrimage of Etheria*, ed. by C. L. Feltoe and M. L. McClure (London: SPCK, 1919), p 27.

bring about moral change, a rebirth rather than a repudiation of the body. Her *Life* is later than Evagrius' and Egeria's period, written in the mid-630s by St Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem (d. 638), but is included in the *Vitae Patrum* (book 1d) to which Gougaud refers.[226]

It needs to be determined as far as possible whether ascetic bathing for mortification can be cleanly demarcated from other forms of ritual immersion, such as bathing in holy water for healing a physical ailment, or whether these were all seen as part of the same beneficial practice, wholesome for physical, spiritual and psychological conditions alike.

Although the distinctions between bathing for cleanliness, medical reasons and devotional purposes are a useful way for a historian to contextualise and categorise individual events, in reality the boundary might not have been delineated in the same manner during the period under study. The only differentiation detected in Bede, for example, is between the form of immersion at baptism and other types of bathing for hygiene and healing alike, mostly but not always reserving the verb *abluere* for baptismal contexts and employing *lavare* for both functional hygiene and ritual healing. In his *Historia ecclesiastica* he uses *abluere* to describe several baptisms: *Si uultis ablui fonte illo salutari* (If you are willing to be cleansed in the same font of salvation); *in fluuio Gleni, qui proximus erat, lauacro remissionis abluere* (he washed them in the waters of regeneration in the river Glen, which was close at hand); *fidei sunt fonte abluti* (they were washed in the fountain of the faith).[227] By way of contrast when he describes bathing for hygiene reasons the verb is *lavare*: *raroque in calidis balneis praeter inminentibus sollemniis maioribus... lauari voluerit* ([Etheldreda] would seldom take a

[226] *PL* 73, cols. 673-90; Rosweyd, H. (ed.) (1628) *Vitae Patrum* Book 1d. Antwerp.
[227] *HE* II.5, p 152-3; II.14, p 188-9; III.21, p 280-1; other examples not quoted include: IV.13, p 372-3; IV.16 p 382-3; V.7, p 470-1; V.19 p 522-3.

hot bath except just before the greater feasts).[228] But he describes a *gesith* (thegn) being instructed to wash a diseased part of his wife's body with holy water for healing rather than hygiene purposes with the same verb: *ubicumque maximum ei dolorem inesse didicisset, de ipsa eam aqua lauaret* (wash the place where the pain was worst with the water).[229] Bede also quotes a dialogue by letter between Augustine of Canterbury and Gregory the Great in which the pope says a man can only enter church after having sexual relations with his wife if he washes. This could be a washing for physical hygiene, a ritual washing, and even a spiritual rather than a literal washing according to Gregory's catch-all response, blurring the boundaries between the various possible spiritual and mundane functions of bathing:

> Vir autem cum propria coniuge dormiens, nisi lotus aqua, intrare ecclesiam non debet; sed neque lotus intrare statim debet. Lex autem ueteri populo praecepit, ut mixtus uir mulieri et lauari aqua debeat et ante solis occasum ecclesiam non intrare (quod tamen intellegi spiritaliter potest...)
>
> A man who has had intercourse with his wife ought not to enter the church unless he has washed himself; and even when washed he ought not to enter immediately. Now the law commanded the ancient people that when a man had intercourse with a woman he ought to wash himself and should not enter the church before sunset; but this can be explained in a spiritual sense. [230]

Yet in the next question put by Augustine to Gregory, about sexual 'illusions' during sleep, the Pope replies by comparing two different types of washing, notably using the verb *abluere* in what is not strictly a baptismal context:[231]

> sed lauandus est aqua, ut culpas cogitationis lacrimis abluat
>
> and he must be washed with water in the sense that he should wash away the sins of thought with his tears[232]

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[228] *HE* IV.19, p 392-3.
[229] *HE* V.4 p 462-3.
[230] *HE* I.27, p 94-5.
[231] For the notion of a 'baptism of tears' see T. O'loughlin and H. Conrad-O'Briain, 'The "baptism of Tears" in Early Anglo-Saxon Sources', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 22 (1993), pp 65–83.
[232] *HE* I.27, p 98-9.

As Sarah Foot (1992) points out in an extensive attempt to reconstruct early Anglo-Saxon baptism, the precise ritual formula for baptism as Bede and his contemporaries understood it is not documented in any surviving liturgical texts. It is therefore unknowable exactly what is meant by Bede's use of the baptismal verb *abluere*. Foot suggests it could have been any one of four methods (submersion, immersion, affusion or aspersion).[233] Foot does not however consider the topic of devotional bathing as a means of reconstructing elements of the baptismal ritual, which is one of the approaches adopted in this research.

Evidence of the precise nature of wetting during the baptismal ritual in the early church more generally has received critical attention. There is something of a contrast between the evidence from material culture that fonts were not deep enough to submerge an adult and the textual evidence that the candidate was plunged or otherwise immersed in the water. Everett Ferguson's exhaustive survey of early fonts indicates that they would contain water approximately one metre deep, in light of which he surmises that the candidate either leaned into the water, or kneeled, or had water poured over the exposed upper part of the body as they stood in it.[234] However it was performed, the effect of the immersion was for the candidate to be made wet all over. Kneeling in a metre of water would bring the depth of immersion for an adult to somewhere around the shoulders.

One final point about Evagrius' bathing has particularly interesting parallels in accounts of water interaction in early medieval Britain: the presence of a *δαίμων*, 'demon' and its banishment by immersion in water. This aspect is not considered by Gougaud, but it opens up perhaps the most relevant context of all when considering the many functions

[233] Sarah Foot, '"By Water in the Spirit": the Administration of Baptism in Early Anglo-Saxon England', in *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, ed. by John Blair and Richard Sharpe (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), pp 171–92, at p 177-8.
[234] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), p 669.

that water can play in Christian ritual of the early church, which is its agency as a medium for and site of exorcism. The frequent occurrence of exorcistic rituals in the many accounts studied in this research show a particularly heightened association with the ability of water to cleanse an individual, and also to act as an environment which can itself harbour demons. At the direction of a holy man or woman, this potent medium can act as the catalyst for transformation at the most fundamental spiritual level.

6.3 Columba in Pictland: bathing and exorcism in the British landscape

Both forms of bathing, ascetic and healing, show evidence of a ritualised expression of belief, using the physical materials of the human body and water in order to effect a spiritual and physical change, a repeatable action that can be connected to several important Christian ritual practices. Mortification is therefore only a relatively small part of the many contexts in which devotional bathing can be placed. Another point introduced above is that British bathing narratives refer to a material and spiritual change effected not only on the human body but also on the body of water itself, specifically regarding the presence of demons and other creatures.

One of the earliest incidents of spiritually charged bathing in a British hagiography is contained in Adomnán's *vita* of Columba, describing an encounter with a cursed well during one of the saint's journeys to Pictland. It is an interesting example of the way in which the emphasis on different aspects of ritual washing can be intensified according to the context, an activity rich with possibilities. The bathing ritual in question relates to a poisoned well which Columba blesses and purifies during a visit to king Bridei of the Picts. The supernatural power of the noxious waters is clear, and is also spiritual in origin:

> Alio in tempore uir beatus, cum in Pictorum prouincia per aliquot demoraretur dies, audiens in plebe gentili de alio fonte deuulgari famam, quem quasi deum

> stolidi homines diabulo eorum obcaecante sensus uenerabantur. Nam de eodem fonticulo bibentes aut in eo manus uel pedes de industria lauantes, daemonica deo permittente percussi arte aut lepri aut lusci aut etiam debiles aut quibuscumque aliis infestati infirmitatibus reuertebantur. Ob quae omnia seducti gentiles diuinum fonti deferebant honorem. Quibus conpertís sanctus alia die intrepidus accessit ad fontem. Quod uidentes magi, quos sepe ipse confussos et uictos a sé repellebat, ualde gauisi sunt, scilicet putantes eum similia illius nocuae tactu aquae passurum. Ille uero imprimís eleuata manu sancta cum inuocatione Christi nominis manus lauat et pedes. Tum deinde cum sociis de eadem a sé benedicta bibit. Ex illaque die daemones ab eodem recesserunt fonte; et non solum nulli nocere permisus est, sed etiam post sancti benedictionem et in eo lauationem multae in populo infirmitates per eundem sanatae sunt fontem.
>
> At one time, when the blessed man passed some days in the province of the Picts, he heard that the fame of another well was widespread among the heathen populace, and that the insensate people venerated it as a god, the devil deluding their understanding. For those that drank from this well, or deliberately washed their hands or feet in it, were struck, by devilish art, God permitting it, and returned leprous, or half blind, or even crippled, or suffering from some other infirmity. Led astray by all this, the heathen gave honour to the well as to a god. When he learned of that, the saint went boldly to the well one day. The magicians, whom he often repelled from himself in confusion and defeat, rejoiced greatly when they saw this, since they imagined that he would suffer the like ills, from touching that noxious water. But he, first raising his holy hand in invocation of the name of Christ, washed his hands and feet; and after that, with those that accompanied him, drank of the same water, which he had blessed. And from that day, the demons withdrew from that well, and not only was it not permitted to harm any one, but after the saint's blessing, and washing in it, many infirmities among the people were in fact cured by the same well. [235]

The Picts are said to worship their well as a god on account of its baneful properties, which immediately focuses attention not on the asceticism of the immersion but on the body of water itself. It also stands in sharp contrast to the role that water sources play in cults based on healing. In comparison with Evagrius' prototype washing, it is clear that the spiritual efficacy of the ritual has less to do with the body of the saint and rather more to do with the water itself. Even so it is significant in terms of a Christian cosmology that the presence of a demon is attested in both Evagrius and Adomnán's texts – ritual bathings that are so different in many other respects.

[235] *Vita Columbae*, II.11, Anderson & Anderson (1991), p 108-11.

Columba's blessing of the well occurs immediately after another incident in which he produces a flow of water from rock by miracle in order to baptise the child of a presumably Christian couple in Ardnamurchan, where the saint is travelling. This sets a possible baptismal context for the poisoned well, but Adomnán does not refer to any actual conversion or baptism of the Picts as a whole during Columba's repeated and seemingly successful visits to Pictland, a point considered further below.

The precise ritual by which Columba blesses the cursed well appears simple and minimal, the saint raising his hands and calling on the name of Christ. This probably means that Columba made the sign of the cross when he raised his hand. Five chapters later the saint chides a young man called Colmán who was having trouble filling a pail with milk, explaining that there was a devil at the bottom of the container who should have been driven away by *inpresso dominicae crucis signo*, 'imprinting the sign of the Lord's cross'. Adomnán then sparsely describes Columba's performance of this exorcism: *sub sanctae manus benedictione*, 'under the blessing of his holy hand'.[236]

There appears to be no direct biblical or hagiographic precedent for this worship of a noxious, demon-infested well, which suggests this account has a degree of historical plausibility. The use of geothermal springs as cursing wells are the only close approximation, a geographical feature not found in Scotland and also not typically worshipped on account of the water's poisonous properties.[237] Exodus 15: 23-26 offers the only slight match in the Bible, an account of the bitter well water at Marah where Moses throws in a piece of wood and renders the water drinkable. Afterwards Moses promises to keep the people of Israel free from the illnesses that afflicted the Egyptians, referring to the 10 plagues in Exodus chapters 7-12. There is however no direct

[236] *Vita Columbae* II.16, p 116-7.
[237] Bernard Mees, *Celtic Curses* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), p 29-40 for cult activity including the use of cursing tables at Bath, England.

connection that can be made between this account and the Pictish well's curses, which are different to those of the biblical plagues.

This lack of literary precedent strengthens the possibility that at least some of the details might record a genuine indigenous belief. It is notable here that the notion of a deadly body of water being worshipped as a god accords precisely with Gildas' description of pre-Christian beliefs concerning rivers described in chapter 3.[238] A parallel can also be seen with a well described in Tírechán's 7th century *vita* of St Patrick which local *magi* also worship as a god:

> honorabant magi fontem et immolaverunt dona ad illum in donum dii
>
> the druids honoured the well and offered gifts to it as to a god[239]

Only the Pictland well, however, is described as being worshipped on account of its harmful properties.

Columba's activity to dispel the demons in the poisoned well sets the pattern for an even more dramatic intervention in the Pictish landscape, the saint's repulsion of an aggressive beast in the river Ness, commonly taken as the first literary appearance of the Loch Ness monster.[240] As Sharpe points out, it is unknowable whether Adomnán visited Pictland many times or whether all these events occurred during the same journey, but it is interesting to note that one possible location identified by historians for the poisoned well is Invermoriston, which is about half a mile from the western shore of Loch Ness.[241]

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[238] Gildas: *De excidio* 4.2-3.
[239] Tírechán: *collectanea de sancto Patricio* ch. 39 (Anal. Boll. Vol. 2, p 59); translation from *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. by L. Bieler (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), p 153, who translates *magi* as druids, rather than wizards. For discussion on this point see Sharpe (1995) n. 287, p 334.
[240] *Vita Columbae* II.27; on the Loch Ness monster see *Life of St. Columba*, ed. R. Sharpe (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), *n*. 283, p 333.
[241] Janet Bord and Colin Bord, *Sacred Waters: Holy Wells and Water Lore in Britain and Ireland* (London: Paladin, 1985), p 32.

The beast in the river is not described as a demon but *bestia* and *bellua* (beast, monster), a creature which had killed a Pictish man swimming in the river, whose funeral Columba encounters. Columba instructs one of his followers, Luigne moccu Min, to swim across the same river to fetch a boat, which prompts the beast to reappear. At this point the saint directs a ritual action towards it:

> Vir tum beatus uidens, omnibus qui inerant tam barbarís quam etiam fratribus nimio terrore perculsís, cum salutare sancta eleuata manu in uacuo aere crucis pincxisset signum inuocato dei nomine feroci imperauit bestiae, dicens: 'Noles ultra progredi, nec hominem tangas. Retro citius reuertere.' Tum uero bestia hac sancti audita uoce retrorsum acsi funibus retraheretur uelociore recursu fugit tremefacta,... Fratres tum recessise uidentes bestiam, Lugneumque commilitonem ad eos intactum et incolomem in nauicula reuersum, cum ingenti ammiratione glorificauerunt deum in beato uiro. Sed et gentiles barbari qui ad praesens inerant eiusdem miraculi magnitudine quod et ipsi uiderant conpulsi deum magnificarunt christianorum.
>
> While all that were there, barbarians and even the brothers, were struck down with extreme terror, the blessed man, who was watching, raised his holy hand and drew the saving sign of the cross in the empty air; and then, invoking the name of God, he commanded the savage beast, and said: 'You will go no further. Do not touch the man; turn backward speedily.' Then, hearing this command of the saint, the beast, as if pulled back with ropes, fled terrified in swift retreat;...
>
> Then, seeing that the beast had withdrawn and that their fellow-soldier Lugne had returned to them unharmed and safe, in the boat, the brothers with great amazement glorified God in the blessed man. And also the pagan barbarians who were there at the time, impelled by the magnitude of this miracle that they themselves had seen, magnified the God of the Christians.[242]

As scholars have pointed out,[243] the most likely hagiographical precedent for this intervention is found in Sulpicius Severus' *Dialogi*, where St Martin repels a creature that is swimming towards him and his companions on a river bank.[244] Here however the word used is *serpens*, a creature with a more exegetically promising pedigree, and yet still described without any suggestion of demonic influence. The detail of the ropes in Adomnán's text merits a second look in this respect: could it be an allusion to the

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[242] *Vita Columbae* II.27, p 132-5.
[243] Dominic Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), p 63.
[244] Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogi* III. ch 9.

practice of restraining demoniacs? There is biblical precedent in the synoptic gospel account of the demoniac at Gadarene,[245] who repeatedly broke out of his chains, and closer to the era under study the practice of binding the demon-possessed is recorded by Sulpicius Severus in his *Dialogi*, in a different context from the incident with the river snake.[246] The binding of the devil is a common theme in later Anglo-Saxon writings.[247]

Columba's action in dismissing the beast is markedly formulaic. When St Martin sends away the snake swimming in a river he simply tells it to go away, and it does not disappear but changes direction:

> Serpens flumen secabat, et ripæ in qua constiteramus, adnatabat: In nomine, inquit, Domini jubeo te redire. Mox se mala bestia ad verbum Sancti retorsit, et in ulteriorem ripam nobis exspectantibus transmeavit. Quod cum omnes non sine miraculo cerneremus, altius ingemiscens ait, Serpentes me audiunt, et homines non audiunt.[248]

> A serpent, cutting its way through a river, was swimming towards the bank on which we had taken our stand. 'In the name of the Lord,' said Martin, 'I command thee to return.' Instantly, at the word of the holy man, the venomous beast turned round, and while we looked on, swam across to the farther bank. As we all perceived that this had not happened without a miracle; he groaned deeply, and exclaimed, 'Serpents hear me, but men will not hear.'[249]

Columba, by way of contrast, makes the sign of the cross in the air, and the beast is restrained and then disappears from the scene. As seen above in chapter 5, Sulpicius Severus' *Dialogi* provides the narrative inspiration for a British hagiography, and again there is an editorial reworking to increase the focus on the ritual interaction of human and the natural world. In previous study it was shown that Sulpicius' raw material was reworked to create a story based on the formulaic application of penitential ritual: a raven had damaged St Cuthbert's guesthouse on Inner Farne, and subsequently returned

[245] Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39; Matthew 8:28-34.
[246] Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogi* I. chs 20 and 22.
[247] Peter Dendle, *Satan Unbound: The Devil in Old English Narrative Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p 69-70 and p 147 *n*. 22.
[248] Sulpicius Severus: *Dialogi* III. ch 9.
[249] *NPNF* Series II, Vol. XI, p 50.

with some pig's lard for the saint to offer his guests. Is there a similar liturgical shape that has helped Adomnán to mould this incident?

In contrast to St Martin's engagement with pagan landscapes, particularly his destruction of a sacred pine tree,[250] the pagan cult site at the poisoned well is not destroyed but rather redeemed, the body of water exorcised of any malign power and lingering demonic presence and claimed for Christ. So too the beast in the river Ness is apparently banished by the sign of the cross, and the body of water thus rendered safe for human use.

It would appear therefore that bathing in northern British waters can best be understood in a much wider context than the lonely mortifications of Evagrius, since it appears in combination with and in parallel to a far larger tradition that places the emphasis firmly on the bodies of water themselves. The urgent need to exorcise demons from these watery places can be detected in Adomnán's writings, which opens up a much larger cultural context in which to place Columba's bodily interventions in the Pictish landscape.

As research has indicated so far, the natural world was one of the prime arenas for negotiation between Christian and pre-Christian beliefs. Missionaries sought to win over potential converts by a demonstration of the effectiveness of their faith in terms that were convincing and appealing to the mass laity. In light of this missionary context, this interface between conflicting beliefs, it is necessary to investigate some of the pre-Christian attitudes and spiritual associations that confronted the early Christians, not least because such study reveals they are not quite as simple as most commentators appear to assume. As a medium for missionary negotiation, therefore, it is interesting to consider in greater detail the narratives attached to natural bodies of water, narratives

[250] Sulpicius Severus: *Vita Martini*, ch. 13.

which help to contextualise Columba's battles with the demons, poisons and monsters in Pictish waterways.

On the surface, it would appear that there are some simple points of contact between Christian and pagan beliefs in the spiritual power and agency of water. Barbara Yorke suggests that pre-Christian beliefs helped to shape the practice of river baptism in the early British church, which Bede records during the mission of St Paulinus (d. 644) to the people of king Edwin (*HE* II.14):

> [river baptism] can also be seen as a bridge between Christianity and the pre-Christian religions of Britain. The regenerative powers of water were probably an element of these religions as well, as is suggested in particular by the healing springs of Romano-Celtic religion and the apparent identification of rivers with goddesses.[251]

Yorke's interpretation perhaps needs to take more account of the prototype of river baptism in biblical tradition, and also the context of a conversion-era church that lacked a built infrastructure in which to administer the sacrament. More important, however, is the degree of speculation it requires about British paganism: is there any evidence to back up a claim that Romano-Celtic religion 'probably' celebrated the regenerative powers of water, either generally or universally? There is perhaps an elision being made with the term 'Romano-Celtic' that requires particular care. The Romans certainly had an extensive array of water deities and cults which they imported to Britain and for which evidence survives,[252] but how far was that either absorbed into or adopted by native practice? Notwithstanding the Roman aspect of this claim, the evidence of water-based cult activity in pre-Christian Britain is rather more mixed than Yorke's argument assumes.

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[251] Yorke (2006), p 127.

[252] See for example the nymphaeum shrine at Lullingstone Roman villa (Hutton (2014), p 278) or the extensive evidence of cult activity at Bath: Ian Bradley, *Water: A Spiritual History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), p 51-6.

Richard Sharpe's footnote to Columba's baptism of a child in Ardnamurchan also rests on the notion that Celtic wells might have been a point of easy assimilation between pre-Christian and Christian cultures:

> Pagan well-worship was easily transmuted into Christian practice... Wells and springs have been places of religious devotion for many cultures. In Iron Age Britain it was an area where Roman and Celtic paganism harmonized easily.[253]

Sharpe also cites Anne Ross's study of pre-Christian Britain, in which she too talks of Celtic water cults, but frequently in her study the cited evidence sounds rather less convincing than her assertions would suggest:

> In Britain positive archaeological evidence for temples situated at the sources of rivers is lacking, but something in the nature of those attested for Gaul, but in a less sophisticated style can no doubt be inferred.[254]

One thing is certain about the conversion-era landscape of Britain, and that is the presence of a wide range and variety of water sources, bodies and courses. Springs, wells, lakes, rivers and of course the sea itself are present across the country, making Britain one of the most abundantly well-watered regions to be converted to Christianity in Late Antique and early medieval Europe. It would be a fair assumption, therefore, to conclude that this landscape had already been overwritten by thousands of years of devotional gratitude for such plentiful supply, an assumption that lies behind academic research on the period to date.

Pre-Christian beliefs have left little trace in the archaeological or textual records arising in Britain,[255] offering almost no firm evidence regarding the cultic and cultural associations that attached to natural water features. After the conversion era and hence the advent of literacy, Anglo-Saxon literature is replete with water and particularly sea imagery. One scholar who has examined this topic discusses the evidence for a small

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[253] Sharpe (1995) n. 234, p 322-3.
[254] Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London: Sphere Books Ltd, 1974), p 48.
[255] Blair (2005) p 184 comments that "Anglo-Saxon pagan activity is likely to be invisible to us."

number of swimming pools in Roman Britain before moving on to the Anglo-Saxons, to whom he attributes a discernible affinity with natural water:

> As far as the history of swimming is concerned, however, the conquest of Britain by the Anglo-Saxons merely replaced one people [the Romans] who swam by another. The records of the skill in Anglo-Saxon England are few, but they suggest that swimming was both practised and given a status of honour in society. The Anglo-Saxons originated in north Germany, and there is no doubt that swimming was in use among the German peoples in general during the centuries before the settlement of Britain.[256]

It is something of a stretch to state that the Anglo-Saxons 'replaced' the Romans, but Nicholas Orme bypasses what might be called the indigenous cultures of Britain in his study, citing only two late texts from Wales, the Mabinogion and the story of *Math Son of Mathonwy*.[257] As this gap in scholarship indicates, there is very little evidence in the conversion era from which to draw any firm conclusions about the spiritual or other meanings that might attach to both natural bodies of water and bathing in them, particularly when it comes to indigenous British cultures. Yet examining this limited evidence carefully reveals a much more acute sense of anxiety attaching to natural bodies of water, an aspect that academic research to date has not interrogated to any notable degree.

Miranda Green's study of pre-Christian religion in northern Europe has much to say about water-based shrines associated with healing, which are identified by archaeological finds of votive carvings depicting limbs, body parts and internal organs. Although widespread in Gaul and reasonably well distributed in southern England, the evidence for them fades out the further one travels north:

> There is far less overt evidence for shrines associated with therapeutic springs in Britain than in Gaul, but such cult-sites did exist. One of the most important was the internationally-patronised temple of Sulis at Bath... Ritual associated with

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[256] Nicholas Orme, *Early British Swimming 55 BC - AD 1719* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1983), p 10-11

[257] *Ibid*. p 13; the *Mabinogion* is thought to be 11th-12th century and *Math Son of Mathonwy* is in the 11th century *Mabinogi*.

> wells was noted above as being an especial feature particularly of southern Britain in the later Iron Age[258]

Ronald Hutton's more recent work goes further, challenging popular conceptions about pre-Christian affiliation with water in Britain by balancing the evidence against that of continental Celtic, Roman and Greek sources, even to the extent of downplaying the significance of Bath:

> despite the widespread modern talk of 'Celtic holy wells', there is not much sign of religious significance being attached to springs. The main exception is the most spectacular of these in Britain, the hot one at Bath... We know that this was sacred to the Iron Age British, because the Romans recorded the name of the goddess to whom they dedicated it, Sulis, but the quantity of objects which they actually deposited in it, or around it, still seems small compared with those in other kinds of water... there is much less sign of a cult of either springs or wells in pre-Roman Britain than elsewhere in the ancient world, including Greece and Rome.[259]

Cultic attachment to the hot springs at Bath appears to have ended with the departure of Roman administration from Britain, their dilapidated state of abandonment referred to in the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Ruin*.[260] Bede appears to suggest in the first chapter of his *Historia ecclesiastica* that the Anglo-Saxons used these hot springs for bathing, a point that will be considered further in chapter 7. A period of disuse between the Romans and the Anglo-Saxons can thus be inferred, indicating at the very least a degree of indifference by native Britons towards this cultic site.

In a separate form of ritual connected to water, there is considerable archaeological evidence that pre-Christian people in northern Europe, including northern Britain, would throw or deposit objects into lakes and bogs. The lake of Llyn Cerrig Bach on Anglesey has produced more than 180 mainly metal objects dating from the Iron Age, which were discovered in 1942. They are now thought to have been deposited between

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[258] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), p 143-4. Green does not address the extent to which such cultic sites were Roman influenced.
[259] Hutton (2014), p 217.
[260] Ian D. Rotherham, *Roman Baths in Britain* (Stroud: Amberley, 2012), chs. 6, 7.

300 BC and 100 AD.[261] As Miranda Green acknowledges, these ritual offerings might have been made either in propitiation or in appeasement.[262] It is important to note that whatever the purpose of such ritual activity, it is far removed from the impulse behind depositing votive offerings shaped into body parts at natural springs, where intercession for healing is the obvious motive.

Another observation arising from material evidence is that historians have noted a curious lack of evidence for the consumption of fish in Iron Age Britain.[263] Whether or not there was any cultural or superstitious reason for this is difficult to determine from such an absence of evidence, but it might be a matter of wider significance in early Britain. As late as the 7th century and in a predominantly Anglo-Saxon context, Bede records that the people of West Sussex were unable to fish properly.[264] This might simply indicate cultural preferences or even technological limitations rather than serving as any sort of signal of religious or spiritual sanction against aquatic foods, but once again at very least this might well serve to supress further any impulse towards the veneration or celebration of water as a life-giving element.

As investigation into the spiritual depths of natural water progresses north, the earliest evidence depicts a markedly more hostile set of associations, where any trace of water's regenerative power is not only absent from the record but replaced with something considerably more sinister. Columba's engagement with Pictish water sources offers the

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[261] National Museum of Wales: www.museumwales.ac.uk/2363/
[262] Green (2004), pp 131, 133.
[263] A display in the British Museum's 2016 exhibition The Celts highlighted this evidence from Iron Age Britain: "Scientific analyses of ancient teeth, and the absence of fish bones at settlements, imply that – surprisingly – most people living in Britain at this time avoided eating fish. Perhaps food from the watery world of the gods was taboo." There is published academic research to substantiate this absence of fish in the diet, including J. Montgomery and others, 'Strategic and Sporadic Marine Consumption at the Onset of the Neolithic: Increasing Temporal Resolution in the Isotope Evidence.', *Antiquity*, 78.338 (2013), pp 1060–72.
[264] *HE* IV.13.

clearest evidence that the communal memories embedded in this landscape were one of the saint's greatest obstacles, as potentially lethal as his most implacable human opponents.

Several ancient wells in areas of Britain traditionally described as Celtic have legends attached that associate them with beheading, skulls and drowning, a Christian layer perhaps added to older stories in the form of a miraculous resurrection of the victim. St Winifred at Holywell in north Wales is no doubt the most famous example of a beheaded Celtic saint restored to life, with other examples including St Decuman in Watchet, north Somerset, and St Nectan in north Devon.[265] All of these are however recorded in much later medieval texts, and the association between beheading and holy wells is not in any case exclusive to Britain. Ian Bradley concludes that the association is more likely to arise from the Christian cult of relics, particularly the practice of drinking water from a saint's skull,[266] although he does not address the archaeological evidence for skull deposits in wells dating from the pre-Christian era.[267]

Ritual drowning is attested in relatively early evidence, particularly in Scotland. Talorgen, the son of the king of Atholl, is recorded as being deliberately drowned in 739 AD in the Annals of Ulster.[268] The large Pictish/Christian stone in the front garden of the former manse at Glamis has an image of a cauldron being used presumably for drowning victims, two pairs of legs appearing out of the top of it (see below). The stone is thought to be 9th century, the cauldron appearing on the face inscribed with a large

[265] St Winifred's *Vita* exists in an early 14th century manuscript, British Library MS Lansdowne 436; St Decuman's *Vita* is 15th century; St Nectan's earliest *Vita* is in a 12th century manuscript (Nicholas Orme, *The Saints of Cornwall* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p 104 for Decuman, p 198 for Nectan).
[266] Bradley (2012), p 70.
[267] Green (2004), p 140, 143 and especially 154.
[268] Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 80-1000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), p 69.

Celtic cross. Obscure Pictish imagery with no obvious Christian significance is found on the other face.

Set alongside this record of ritual use, the aforementioned lack of archaeological evidence for votive wells in northern Britain suggests that there might not have been a broad cultic attachment to water for its healing or providential properties across north and south pre-Christian Britain, despite assumptions to the contrary. One obvious explanation for this might be based on the observation at the start of this section, that natural water is present in great abundance in Britain, so readily available that its supply could be taken more or less for granted. However, the evidence that is recorded in the earliest Christian interaction with sites associated with pagan beliefs indicates something rather more negative than mere indifference. And such an abundance might also be expected to result in more rather than less fishing.

The evidence appears to indicate that something lurked in and around dark and deep waters, and it is quite clear that it was not always as benign as water's potential as a regenerative and health-giving element would suggest.

6.4 Exorcising and anointing the sea: a lesson from Germanus

There is a further incident in the *Vita Columbae* which contains an interesting reference to the precedent for directing ritual action towards water to effect an exorcism, a story set once again on the river Ness. At the head of the river, facing the loch, the saint

intervenes against a storm which has been stirred up *arte daemonum*, ' by the art of devils', and after invoking the name of Christ orders his men to set sail, upon which the wind changes direction and gently propels his boat. It might simply be a coincidence, but this appears to be the third of the saint's interventions with water in and around Loch Ness, following the poisoned well that might be located at Invermoriston and the appearance of the beast. In this incident, unlike the others, Adomnán cites a specific hagiographical precedent to provide a context and authority for this miracle:

> Síc enim aliquando daemoniorum legiones sancto Germano epioscopo de sinu gallico causa humanae salutis ad Brittanniam nauiganti medio in equore occurrerant, et oponentes pericula procellas concitabant; caelum diemque tenebrarum caligine obducebant. Quae tamen omnia sancto orante Germano dicto citius sedata detersa cessarunt caligine.
>
> Noster itaque Columba uidens contra se elimenta concitari furentia Christum inuocat dominum... Et post haut grande interuallum uenti contrarii ad iteneris ministeria cum omnium ammiratione reuertuntur.
>
> Thus did hosts of evil spirits once attack the holy bishop Germanus in the midst of the sea, when he was sailing from the bay of Gaul to Britain, in the cause of men's salvation. They put perils in his way, and stirred up storms; they covered sky and daylight with a mist of darkness. But more quickly than speech, at the prayer of Saint Germanus all these things were calmed, and ceased. And the mist was cleared away.
>
> So our Columba, seeing that the elements were being roused to fury against him, called upon Christ the Lord... And after but a short space of time, to the astonishment of all, the advese winds were turned about, to serve the voyage.[269]

Adomnán's direct invocation of St Germanus of Auxerre is extraneous to his core narrative, and it might have been more logical for him to cite Christ's calming of a storm on the sea of Galilee.[270] It is therefore possible to conclude that the precedent set by Germanus when he calmed a raging sea was considered innovative, since it served as a prototype, and authoritative, because it was chosen above other more exegetically substantial narratives.

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[269] *Vita Columbae* II.34, p 144-5.
[270] The synoptic incident that is further explored below; Mark 4:35-41, Matthew 8:23-27, Luke 8:22-25.

It is Germanus rather than Evagrius who appears to have been most inspirational to early Christians as they entered the watery places of Pictland. This missionary bishop's well-attested historical precedent merits particular attention when examining Celtic ritual interaction with water as a collective cultural expression of beliefs. In addition, Bede also places considerable significance on the prototype of Germanus and his intervention against a storm, an influential event in early British history that clearly merits examination.

Germanus' intervention is recorded in what is the earliest extensive text about the British church in the post-Roman era, the *Vita Germani* by Constantius of Lyon, written *c.* 475-80.[271] Germanus' visit to Britain began in 429, placing this incident in the earliest decades following the end of direct Roman rule, when British Christianity was left to evolve without any formal imperial protection and only intermittent ecclesiastical oversight. Perhaps significantly, this precedent for a ritual interaction with natural bodies of water places the origins of such practice at a point in history before anything resembling a distinctive Celtic Christianity can be said to have emerged. It is therefore interesting to explore just how foundational this mission proved to be in terms of subsequent ritual interactions with nature.

The incident comes during the crossing of St Germanus to Britain, during what Constantius describes as his first visit to combat the Pelagian heresy. A storm on the English Channel has been whipped up by the action of demons and threatens to prevent the bishop's arrival, at which point Germanus intervenes:

> Qui periculi inmanitate constantior Christum invocat, increpat oceanum et procellis saevientibus causam relegionis obponit, statimque, adsumpto oleo, in nomine Trinitatis levi aspergine fluctus saevientes obpressit.

[271] *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head (London: Sheed & Ward, 1995), p 76. The Latin text is cited from *MGH SS rer. Merov* vol 7, p247-283.

> He, all the more steadfast for the very immensity of the danger, in the name of Christ chided the ocean, pleading the cause of religion against the savagery of the gales. Then, taking some oil, he lightly sprinkled the waves in the name of the Trinity and this diminished their fury.[272]

This exorcism directed at a natural body of water is effected through the application of oil on the water and the invocation of the Trinity. Although these two liturgically significant details are omitted in Adomnán's brief summary of the event, they are however picked up by Bede, as will be described next.

Germanus' ritual interaction with demon-possessed waters emerges as one of the most influential ritual patterns discernible in the early medieval texts arising from Britain. Bede echoes Germanus' use of oil to anoint the sea, and thus calm a storm, in his metrical *Vita sancti Cuthberti*. This is the earlier of Bede's two versions of the *vita*, known to be written between 705 and 716 due to the inclusion of references to king Osred, and most likely to date from the first three years of the king's reign.[273]

The incident involving oil is an original sequence, no part of which is found in the Anonymous *Vita sancti Cuthberti*. In the narrative, a monk called Utta asks Aidan, the founder of the Lindisfarne monastery, for a blessing to protect him during a forthcoming sea voyage. Aidan prophesises that a storm will occur and gives the monk some chrism (*chrismate*) with which to anoint and calm the waves.[274] This same narrative is repeated in the *Historia ecclesiastica* (III.15) with the addition of a named source, the priest Cynemund, who heard the story from Utta himself and relayed it to Bede. The oil is described as *oleum sanctificatum*, which Colgrave & Mynors translates as 'holy oil', although 'consecrated oil' would be as accurate. There is no reference to demons in the texts, merely to a storm, *tempestas*.

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[272] *Vita Germani* ch. 13, p 260; translation Noble & Head (1995), p 86.
[273] Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600-899* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 1996), p 34.
[274] *VCM*, l. 151.

As mentioned, Bede's *Historia* includes a near-verbatim copy of Constantius' *Life of St Germanus*, but in this he alters the text to replace Germanus' use of oil with water:

> Qui periculi inmanitate constantior Christum inuocat, at adsumto in nomine sanctae Trinitatis leui aquae spargine fluctus saeuientes obprimit
>
> More resolute than they in the face of frightful danger, Germanus called on Christ and in the name of the Holy Trinity took a little water and sprinkled it on the raging billows.[275]

A footnote in Colgrave & Mynors offers an explanation for this apparent editorial change: "The *Vita Germani* has *adsumto oleo*; *aquae* is added, perhaps by Bede to make good a defect in his copy of the *Vita*, which contained several errors." This is certainly possible as an explanation, since the incident involving Aidan and Utta suggests that Bede appears to be comfortable with the notion of pouring sanctified oil on the sea to calm a storm. It might therefore be reading too much into what Colgrave & Mynors considers an insignificant alteration, but the possibility does arise that there is a slightly different context in which to consider the different ministrations. In Aidan and his monk's application of oil, the sea is simply described as stormy, but in the case of Germanus the sea has been whipped up by demons, who are set on preventing the bishop from reaching Britain. It is therefore possible that Bede is making a slight switch to what he considers a more conventional ritual method of exorcism, which in one other incident in the *Historia ecclesiastica* involves the use of holy water.[276] This is however a difficult position to maintain in view of overwhelming evidence for the use of oil for exorcism, first mentioned in a baptismal context in the Apostolic Tradition of the early 3rd century.[277] Although Bede might possibly water down this incident, literally and figuratively, when he amends Constantius's account, the fact that he twice reuses the

[275] *HE* I.17, p 56-7.
[276] *HE* III.11 describes water used to wash the bones of St Oswald; dust from the floor on which the water fell is subsequently used a demon-possessed visitor to Bardney Abbey.
[277] *Apostolic Tradition* ch. 21.

full ritual with sanctified oil suggests that he was comfortable with the idea of directing such clearly sacramental action towards the sea.

What was it about the waters of Britain that demanded such liturgical intervention? The immediate answer supplied in the texts is a sufficient conclusion with which to proceed: the water was some sort of living creature capable of being infested with demons and other hostile creatures. The fact that Christians came prepared to deal with this situation with a toolkit of theological explanations and ritual actions suggests something of a co-ordinated missionary strategy had been prepared, something that later generations appear to have consciously reused.

6.5 The missionary context for rituals directed towards natural water

The way in which missionaries responded to pre-Christian water narratives demonstrates a range of physical interventions were employed in order to conduct what was effectively a conversion of the landscape to Christian significance. These include casting demons out of a poisoned well (followed by washing in it), dismissing the monster in the river Ness (accompanied by swimming in it), and blessing, anointing and exorcising stormy seas in a number of incidents following the example of Germanus. All these therefore provide a wider context in which to place the specific practice of devotional bathing, which forms part of a wide array of missionary resources. What can be concluded for now is that devotional activity focused on natural water can not be categorised as exclusively ascetic, but rather as primarily redemptive. Such activities were designed not to punish the body but to alter the water itself by the bodily intervention of a missionary.

It is a curiosity noted by scholars that for all his intense interaction with the landscape and water features, Columba does not appear to have conducted any mass conversion in

Pictland, at least according to Adomnán's account.[278] The close reading of the saint's liturgical interaction with the landscape presented above serves to isolate and highlight this lack of baptismal ritual aimed at the people. Columba certainly prepared the ground, as it were, with his ritualised exorcism of the region's natural water sources, but does not appear to have followed his mission through to its logical conclusion, at least according to Adomnán. Only Bede mentions that Columba converted the Pictish people,[279] a juxtaposition that is difficult to explain given Adomnán's eagerness to promote Columba's success as a Christian leader, and Bede's overt ambivalence about a man who was firmly in the non-Roman Christian tradition of Britain. Reasons for the obscurity of Columba's baptismal legacy will be considered later in this thesis, and do not detract from the fact that his interventions with the Picts and their environment were strongly missionary in character. The conflict between different faiths could not be delineated more clearly than it is in Adomnán's *vita*, which directly pits Columba against hostile *magi* as he grapples with the demons in Pictish water.

One final point about the role of exorcism in hagiographies merits brief consideration. As Peter Brown and others have demonstrated, exorcism occurs primarily at points in a hagiography where the author is keen to stress the saint's credentials as a leader. Significantly, all incidents that Brown cites refer only to the exorcism of demons from possessed human beings:

> Most important of all for a late-antique man were the heavy judicial overtones of the process of exorcism at a shrine. Exorcism had always taken the form of a dialogue in which the invisible authority behind the human agent of exorcism could be seen to be pitted against the power of the demons who spoke through the possessed human sufferer. What was spelled out with unfailing clarity at a late-Roman shrine was that this dialogue was a judicial inquiry.[280]

[278] Sharpe (1995), n. 148, p 294 and n. 275, p 330.
[279] *HE* III.4.
[280] Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p 108.

It seems clear that demonstrations of saintly power in continental hagiographies do not map directly on to the *loci* of early British anxieties concerning the lingering presence of demons. From Germanus onwards, the evidence of early Christian writers and missionaries of Britain appears to coalesce around the notion that many forms of water, including the sea, rivers and wells or springs, required exorcism enacted by a carefully formulated ritual intervention. The liturgical forms that were used to shape these rituals are examined next.

6.6 Ritual precedent for exorcising water

In all these incidents in which hostile forces are removed from natural bodies of water, the formulaic nature of the blessings has a ritual shape clear enough to attempt to recover a liturgical framework. According to the methodology developed in the discipline of liturgical studies, outlined in chapter 2, a comparison between the historical actions described by Constantius, Adomnán and Bede and surviving liturgical texts of the time can help to bridge the modern gap that has tended to regard sacramental liturgy and other ritual activity as separate spheres, a gap identifiable in Gougaud's consideration of ascetic bathing in isolation from other Christian ritual.[281]

In terms of a context in which to place the various ritual activities around natural water described in this chapter, one liturgical framework presents itself as an obvious match: the preparation and use of the font for baptism. As will be seen, all the ritual elements discernible in the hagiographies examined above, including the application of sanctified oil, exorcism of the water itself, ritual washing and even the imposition of a cross can all be traced back to powerfully symbolic and exegetically rich elements in some forms

[281] See above, chapter 2, and Gittos & Hamilton (2016), p 4-5.

of early baptismal liturgy – forms that would have been known to all three of the writers cited in this study.

The first of these is the application of oil to water in order to calm a storm, described by Constantius in his *vita Germani* and subsequently cited by Adomnán and Bede.

Anointing the font was an established part of early church practice by the fifth century, although research has not uncovered any precedent from much before the time of Germanus.[282] A blessing of the font is first attested in the *Apostolic Constitutions* of *c*. 381, which calls for the water simply to be sanctified, without any reference to an accompanying ritual action such as the use of oil.[283] Everett Ferguson describes a Greek MS written in 790, the earliest surviving example of the *Ordo of Constantinople*, which instructs the priest to make three crosses with oil in the water. He believes that the *Ordo of Constantinople* "likely goes back at least to the time of Bishop Proclus", bishop of Constantinople from 434-446, which would make it contemporary with St Germanus.[284]

Another early reference to anointing the font dates from around the year 500, in Pseudo-Dionysius' text the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, which describes holy oil being poured into the font three times in the shape of a cross.[285]

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[282] Alexis James Doval, *Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogue: The Authorship of the Mystagogic Catecheses* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p 95-102 examines a range of early catechetical texts that describe the baptismal liturgy, but finds relatively brief references to the preparation of the font. He suggests there is no extensive explanation of the this part of the liturgy because the ritual was usually performed before the candidates had arrived, in order to minimise the time candidates spent between undressing and immersion; he acknowledges however that three early liturgies indicate that the candidates did indeed witness the blessing of the font (p 102). The baptismal candidates themselves are anointed up to four times on either side of their immersion, making the use of oil in baptism a prominent part of the ritual even when not applied to the water of the font directly.

[283] *The Apostolic Constitutions* VII.43, in *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, ed. by E. C. Whitaker and Maxwell E. Johnson (London: SPCK, 2003), p 39.

[284] Ferguson (2009), p 752-5.

[285] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* II.7, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. by Colm Luibhéid and Paul Rorem (London: SPCK, 1987), p 203;

Much closer to Britain, there is a family of four early Gallican and Celtic missals which offer a crucial early insight into the shape of baptismal liturgy in northern Europe. Two of these are demonstrably Gallican texts dated to the Merovingian period, the *Missale Gothicum* and *Missale Gallicanum vetus*. The *Bobbio Missal* is generally regarded as Gallican too of this same date, although it is an enigmatic early survivor of obscure provenance, and its supposed Irish influence has been discussed by scholars well into the 20th century. These three are all dated to the late 7th or early 8th centuries:

- The *Missale Gothicum*, dating from the end of the 7th century, is believed to have been written in the Burgundy region.[286]

- The incomplete *Missale Gallicanum vetus*, dating from around the year 700, was written in the region of north-eastern Gaul.[287]

- The *Bobbio Missal*, named after its place of discovery in the 17th century, is generally now considered a Gallican text written in south-eastern France, probably in or near the city of Vienne, although it has a number of marked similarities with the Irish *Stowe Missal*. It has been extensively studied in a volume published in 2004.[288]

The fourth liturgical text is the *Stowe Missal*, a document whose Irish origins can be firmly identified by its inclusion of several Irish saints and use of Gaelic. This missal is dated to within a few decades after 792, thought to have been written in Tallaght,

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see also Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism* (Ashgate Publishing, 2006), p 95-6.

[286] Yitzhak Hen and Rob Meens, *The Bobbio Missal: Liturgy and Religious Culture in Merovingian Gaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p 72.

[287] Gabriele Winkler, 'Confirmation or Chrismation? A Study in Comparative Liturgy', in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. by Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), pp 202-18, at p 208.

[288] Hen & Meens (2004), *passim*, p 4-5 for an overview of the document's contents and origins.

modern-day South Dublin.[289] Also known as the Lorrha Missal, it derives its modern name from the library of Stowe House, where it was once part of the collection.

As will be seen through further consideration below, all four texts have enough similarities to be identified as a north European liturgical family, all of which are shaped to some extent by the influence of Ambrose. The *Ambrosian Manual* or *Milanese Manual* is a later liturgy in this family, preserved in a 10th century manuscript but showing clear evidence of continuity with many of Ambrose's peculiar baptismal practices. Louis Duchesne goes so far as to say that Ambrosian liturgy is identical with Gallican liturgy, a transalpine grouping whose procedures were gradually Romanised with every subsequent edition.[290]

All five of these sacramentaries from this apparently Ambrosian family include an exorcism and anointment of the font. In the *Stowe Missal* and *Bobbio Missal*, this occurs at the end of a long section which begins with words of exorcism and ends with words of blessing addressed to the water in the font.[291] In the *Missale Gothicum* chrism is poured into the font immediately before the priest proclaims the exorcism of the water.[292] In the *Missale Gallicanum vetus* the anointment of the font is at some remove from the words of exorcism over the water, but does conclude the preparation of the font even so.[293]

The *Ambrosian Manual* inserts the anointing of the font immediately after an exorcistic passage which talks about floods and storms, also addressed to the water of the font itself:

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[289] O'Loughlin (2000), p 128.
[290] L. Duchesne, *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution. A Study of the Latin Liturgy up to the Time of Charlemagne*, trans. by M. L. McClure (London: SPCK, 1931), p 88-9.
[291] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 281 (*Stowe Missal*), p 271 (*Bobbio Missal*).
[292] *Ibid*. p 260.
[293] *PL* 72, cols 368-9.

> tu rursus altis resoluta verticibus, Nili incolas perdis, et hostili globo freto saeviente persequeris: una eademque salus fidelium, et ultio criminosis.[294]
>
> You melting upon the high peaks bring ruin upon the dwellers of the Nile, and with your fierce raging ever torment the world as it were your enemy. You are one and the same: the salvation of the faithful, the avenger of the wicked.[295]

The exact purpose of adding oil to the font can therefore be understood as a visible sign of the act of exorcism and consecration of the water, a counterpart to the anointment of the candidates themselves with the oil of exorcism immediately before their immersion.

In slight contrast to these five baptismal liturgies, the more Roman-influenced *Gelasian Sacramentary* does not include the application of oil in connection with its consecration of the font, referring only to make a sign over the water.[296]

Another striking point to be found in this preparation of the font in these sacramentaries is the way in which the officiant not merely anoints the water but speaks to it directly, using the second person. The water is itself addressed a creature with its own ability to act, rather than merely a neutral vehicle for demons to inhabit.

These same ritual details (addressing the sea, exorcising it and adding oil) can can be seen in Germanus' direction of a blessing and exorcism towards the stormy sea, and it is the application of oil that gives this intervention its clearly recognisable baptismal form. Constantius does not cite biblical precedent, but the incident is clearly modelled to some extent on the synoptic account of Jesus calming the storm at sea. Constantius uses the same verb for Germanus' address to the waves (*increpat*, 'chided') as the gospel writer Luke employs (*increpavit ventum et tempestatem aquae*, 'he rebuked the wind and the raging water' Luke 8:24).[297] This incident itself has an exorcistic context which patristic

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[294] *Monumenta Veteris Liturgiae Ambrosianae Vol 3*, ed. by Marcus Magistretti (Milan: Ulricum Hoepli, 1904), p 206.
[295] The Ambrosian Manual, ch. 19-20 in Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 190.
[296] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 234.
[297] The other synoptic accounts use *imperavit* ('commanded', Matthew 8:26), and *comminatus est vento et dixit mari* ('rebuked the wind, and said to the sea', Mark 4:39).

writers did not fail to notice, since it immediately precedes Jesus' expulsion of demons into the Gadarene swine.[298] This calming of the storm is not a typology that appears in the sacramentaries cited here, although the *Bobbio Missal* and the *Stowe Missal* do cite the related incident of Christ walking on water.

Although there does not seem to be any surviving liturgical testament to the Christian practice of anointing the font from before the time of Germanus, it seems unlikely that this was an innovation by the missionary himself without any sort of liturgical precedent, given its widespread use in baptismal liturgies soon after.[299] Not least, of course, the *Life* itself was written by Constantius in *c.* 475-80, by which time there is evidence that anointing the font had been established, as noted above.

This incident involving Germanus chiding the sea and anointing it to cast out demons is clearly a striking precedent for the subsequent ritual interactions with natural water found across Britain. Germanus came to pour oil on troubled waters both literally and figuratively during his mission to Britain, and his influence clearly lingered on both counts too.

It is clear that the elements used for his emergency ritual on the boat draws from established baptismal practice in the 5th century. A comparison with a slightly earlier hagiographical account of a storm being quelled demonstrates just how far Constantius' description is shaped by these baptismal actions and elements. This parallel is found in Jerome's *Vita sancti Hilarionis* of around 400, which describes how the saint confronted an earthquake and subsequent tsunami by standing on the beach in Dalmatia, drawing

[298] Blowers (2012), p 258.
[299] There are pre-Christian precedents for pouring oil on water to still waves, a practice studied by Benjamin Franklin while he was in Britain: Franklin, Benjamin 'Of the Stilling of Waves by means of Oil' *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, 64, (London, 1774) pp 445-460. Franklin identified Pliny as the first author to mention the phenomenon.

the sign of the cross three times in the sand and then holding up his hands.[300] Jerome's exegesis on this incident cites Jesus's saying "if you have faith you will move mountains into the sea" (Matt 21:21). By inscribing a cross on the sand, it is clear that Hilarion is protecting the land from the sea, shoring up the natural boundary that keeps the storm's threatening chaos at bay rather than directing any sort of spiritually charged action towards the water itself.

6.7 Font rituals in Ambrosian liturgy

As far as research into this topic has uncovered, it appears to be Ambrose himself who first writes an exorcism of water into the baptismal process, which appears briefly in one of the two lengthy treatises he wrote on baptism, *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis*.[301] The two treatises are thought to date from the last decade of Ambrose's ministry, the 390s, and were perhaps written within a year or two of each other. Ferguson (2009) follows other scholars in identifying *De sacramentis* as a text based primarily on oral presentation, a more informal style compared to the more polished literary form of *De mysteriis*.[302]

A third text directly associated with Ambrose is the *Ambrosian Manual*, introduced earlier in this chapter. Although only attested by a 10th-century document, it coincides with many of Ambrose's distinctive liturgical innovations, preserving much of his own

[300] Jerome: *Vita sancti Hilarionis*, ch. 40.
[301] Thompson, T. & Srawley, J. H. (eds.) *St Ambrose: On the Mysteries, and the Treatise on the Sacraments by an Unknown Author* (New York: Macmillan, 1919) remains the standard translation of the texts, cited here, although the title reflects scholarship of the time which had not firmly identified Ambrose as the author of *De sacramentis* (cf. Ferguson (2009), p 634). The original text for *De sacramentis* is cited from *Saint Ambrose on the Sacraments*, ed. by Henry Chadwick (A.R. Mowbray & Co.: London, 1960), and for *De mysteriis* from *SC* Vol. 25.
[302] Ferguson (2009), p 634-647, at p 634 for the issue of authorship.

thinking in terms of the shape of the liturgy but also marked by subsequent reforms enacted by his Milanese successors.[303]

The significance of this family of Ambrosian liturgical material will be used here to further contextualise the three rituals directed at natural bodies of water in Britain examined above: anointing with chrism, exorcism and signing with a cross.

6.7.1. Exorcism of the font

Ambrose refers to the consecration of the font in both his treatises, but an actual exorcism is mentioned just once, in his exposition on baptism *De sacramentis*:

> Nam ubi primum ingreditur sacerdos, exorcismum facit secundum creaturam aquae, inuocationem postea et precem defert ut sanctificetur fons et adsit praesentia trinitatis aeternae.
>
> For as soon as the priest enters, he makes an exorcism over the element of water, afterwards he offers an invocation and a prayer, that the font may be consecrated, and the presence of the eternal Trinity may come down.[304]

The phrase *creaturam aquae* can be translated more directly as 'creature of water', a further indication of the cosmological potential of each and every baptism to evoke the making and remaking of creation. The same phrase appears in the *Stowe Missal* and *Bobbio Missal* to describe the water in the font. Ambrose's direction of exorcism towards what might be considered an inanimate object is a remarkable liturgical turn when considered in its historical context, particularly the fact highlighted above that exorcism in early European practice was typically directed towards people. The *Gelasian Sacramentary* reflects some of its imagery, the 'creature of water' in the font being prepared by the 'departure of all wickedness', but as mentioned lacking the ritual application of oil or the use of the verb 'to exorcise'.[305]

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[303] Ferguson (2009) p 640 n. 39; Johnson (1999), p 137-40, interrogates both differences and similarities between Ambrose's treatises and the later *Ambrosian Manual*.
[304] *De sacramentis* 1.5.18 (original, p 13-14; translation, p 82).
[305] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 234

Following Ambrose, water was a creature, a subject rather than an object in the Christian ritual as performed by the early church in northern Europe. To understand this point offers a significant insight into the ways in which natural bodies of water appear to respond to the presence of a holy man, the first of what will be many connections presented in this research, firmly associating Celtic water rituals with an Ambrosian baptismal model.

6.7.2. Signing the font water with a cross

The *De mysteriis* records another innovation that appears to be unique to Ambrose, dipping a wooden crucifix into the baptismal water, citing the typology of Moses' casting wood into the bitter-tasting well at Marah in Exodus 15:23-25:

> Aqua enim sine praedicatione dominicae crucis ad nullos usus futurae salutis est; cum uero salutaris fuerit crucis mysterio consecrata, tunc ad usum spiritalis lauacri et salutaris poculi temperatur.
>
> For water without the proclamation of the Lord's cross serves no purpose for future salvation; but when it has been consecrated by the mystery of the saving cross, then it is fitted for the use of the spiritual laver and the cup of salvation.[306]

Both of Ambrose's treatises also contain a unique reference to the cross as part of the credal question of the second immersion:

> Credis in dominum nostrum Iesum Christum et in crucem eius?
>
> Dost thou believe in our Lord Jesus Christ *and in His Cross?*[307] [emphasis added]

The signing of a cross over water is another of the actions identified in the research above into the Columban mission's liturgical interaction with bodies of water. The blessing of the poisonous well, the repulsion of the beast in the river Ness, and even his blessing of a pail of milk all include suggestions that the sign of the cross was made over the liquid in order to effect a positive change in it, ritual actions that like exorcism

[306] *De mysteriis* 3.14; original, p 112; translation, p 50; the same point is made in 4.20: "For what is water without the Cross of Christ? A common element without any sacramental effect."
[307] *De mysteriis* 2.7; *De sacramentis* 2.7.20.

are also closely aligned with the preparation of the font in Ambrosian baptismal liturgy. This use of crucifixional imagery to embody the experiences of baptismal immersion will be further discussed below, chapter 9.

6.7.3. Anointing the font

The redirection of baptismal liturgy towards the landscape has already been noted in connection with Germanus, in his application of oil to the demon-infested stormy sea during his trip to Britain. As mentioned, there is no record of such a ritual action in any baptismal document from much before the time of Germanus, but further examination of this practice indicates that this might be yet another Ambrosian innovation, not least because it features in the *Ambrosian Manual*. There is contextual evidence in Ambrose's two treatises *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis* that the Milanese bishop included an application of oil in his preparation of the font.

The blessing of the water at Christ's own baptism was performed by the actions of both the holy spirit in the form of a bird and by Christ's body entering the water, with different emphases available to patristic commentators accordingly. In *De Sacramentis* Ambrose discusses the view that both the holy spirit and Christ sanctify the water, pointing out that baptismal water needs to be consecrated *before* humans enter it but it could be consecrated *after* Jesus descended because he personally did not need to have any sins washed away. Either way, the conclusion is unavoidable that a consecration of the font is required before humans can enter it:

> Non sanat aqua nisi spiritus descenderit et aquam illam consecrauerit
>
> Water does not heal, unless the Spirit has descended and consecrated that water[308]

The *De mysteriis* further indicates that the Holy Spirit's presence is likely to be signified in some physical way, since it describes the three witnesses required for baptism as

[308] *De sacramentis* 1.5.15, p 13; translation, p 81.

water, the blood and the Spirit and appears to give a context that explains the physical presence of a cross in the preparation of the font:

> Hinc cognosce quod aqua non mundat sine spiritu.
>
> Ideoque legisti quod tres testes in baptismate unum sunt, aqua, sanguis et spiritus, quia si unum horum detrahas, non stat baptismatis sacramentum. Quid est enim aqua sine cruce Christi? Elementum commune sine ullo sacramenti effectu.
>
> Hence know that water does not cleanse without the Spirit.
>
> And for this very reason thou hast read that the three witnesses in baptism are one, the water, the blood, and the Spirit, because, if thou takest away one of these the sacrament of baptism no longer remains. For what is water without the Cross of Christ? A common element without any sacramental effect.[309]

This probably serves to explain the dipping of the crucifix into font, which is mentioned six chapters earlier in 3.14, which leaves only the spirit's physical presence unrepresented. Apart from this dipping of a cross, there is very little other detail about the preparation of the font in either *De mysteriis* or *De sacramentis*. As cited above, Doval (2001) argues convincingly that the bishop performed the exorcism and sanctification of the water of the font before the candidates arrived. There is a gap, therefore, in which the anointing of the baptismal water might well have taken place:

> we can surmise, at least with Ambrose, that since the blessing of the font probably took place before their entrance, the candidates did not witness it.[310]

In summary, the spirit's action was embodied by the application of chrism to the water of the font in five early liturgical texts from northern Europe linked to Ambrosian practice, the *Missale Gothicum*, the *Missale Gallicanum vetus*, the *Bobbio Missal,* the *Stowe Missal* and the *Ambrosian Manual*. On the evidence of these later liturgical texts and his own sacramental theology, Ambrose is likely to have favoured the application of chrism to the font in order to underline the important operation of the holy spirit on

[309] *De mysteriis* 4.19-20, p 113; translation, p 52.
[310] Doval (2001), p 99.

the water, reinforcing his important Christological point about the separate effect that Jesus' entry into the waters of the Jordan had on the element.

This chapter began by examining the legacy of scholarship into Celtic ritual bathing which identified it as an ascetic act, before demonstrating that it formed part of a much wider front in missionary campaign that was directed much more towards natural bodies of water. The origins of this campaign can be traced back to the mission of Germanus in 429, and relied heavily on the ritual exorcism of water, reflecting an innovation that had recently been introduced into baptismal liturgy by Ambrose of Milan. This can therefore be seen as a much more relevant context in which to place Celtic bathing, shaped by the symbolism and ritual of baptismal immersion. Furthermore, Ambrose's writings chart the depths to which the baptismal liturgy can be taken in order to effect change on such a truly cosmological scale, his innovative focus on the spiritual changes wrought in the element through which baptism is conducted. Other patristic writers commented extensively of the symbolism of water, but only in Ambrose is the focus so intensely on the materiality of the ritual: he is the first to exorcise the water of the font, the first to refer to this water as a 'creature' in its own right, and perhaps the first to symbolise its exorcism with oil.

CHAPTER 7

Columba, Cuthbert and the ritual shapes of devotional bathing

On the basis of research presented above into Columba's mission to Pictland, it is argued that there was a particularly sharp anxiety among the Picts about the negative spiritual power of water. Wariness, inhibitions and prohibitions about natural water and its creatures appear prominently in the literature of the period and find particular focus in this region, with its poisonous well, killer river beast and monstrous dwellers in the depths of the sea.[311] It was high on the list of Columba's missionary priorities to counter such spiritual associations with redemptive actions derived in part from baptismal practice, symbolism and theology.

Evidence of anything resembling an actual immersive bathing ritual in Columba's practices is however hard to find in Adomnán's *vita*, although as will be seen there are indications from other sources that this was one of the saint's more memorable traits. Enough detail survives in order to reconstruct the performative details of what turns out to be a striking and influential ritual in Celtic Christian cultures. This creates an interesting context in which to place Cuthbert's later immersions in the waters of northern Britain, particularly his bathing in the sea at Coldingham during a visit to the double (mixed-sex) monastery there, which is examined later in this chapter. The following study follows the same structured approach taken in previous chapters, examining the progression of narratives from writer to writer, broadening its scope to take in the widest possible vista of ritual interactions with natural bodies of water in order to fully contextualise them within the missiology, cosmology and cultural associations of the time.

[311] For the latter see *Vita Columbae* I.19, II.42

7.1 Columba: early devotional bathing

The earliest indication of a bathing ritual is in a poem about St Columba written shortly after his death, providing the first evidence of this memorable cultural expression of Christianity in Britain. The source text is relatively obscure, and is not considered by Gougaud in his seminal study. As seen in the previous chapter, Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* records numerous interactions with natural water, but there is next to nothing in his text which indicates the saint engaged in devotional bathing as a ritualised performance, apart possibly from his brief washing in the holy well at Invermoriston. Adomnán is thought to have written his text around the 100th anniversary of St Columba's death in 597,[312] but there are poems and fragments of verse surviving from before this time which indicate a formulaic, prototype bathing ritual. In particular, one poem in early Irish written shortly after Columba's death offers a brief glimpse of his interaction with the sea. The poem is a work of some obscurity due to its early form of the Irish language, a characteristic that has helped scholars to date it to some time in the 7th century.[313] *A Poem in Praise of Columb Cille* has 25 verses, each of four lines. Its second verse reads:

> Níbu fri coilcthi tincha
> tindscan ernaigdi cassa,
> crochais – níbu hi cinta –
> a chorp for tonna glassa.
>
> It was not on soft beds
> he undertook elaborate prayers,
> he crucified – it was not for crimes –
> his body on the green waves.[314]

[312] For the dating of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* see Sharpe (1995), p 55.
[313] Fergus Kelly, 'A Poem in Praise of Columb Cille', *Ériu*, 24 (1973), pp 1–34. The poem is also discussed in Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), where he accepts Kelly's dating and translation of the verse cited here, p 121-3.
[314] Kelly (1973), p 9.

Such an early position in the poem highlights what was clearly a celebrated feature of the saint's life: he crucified himself on the 'green waves'. This is almost certainly a reference to some form of devotional bathing, a repeatable performance that can be analysed here for its ritual content. The activity is set at night, given the reference to 'soft beds', which establishes a devotional matrix involving nocturnal prayers and immersion in the sea. Notable above all, however, is the striking use of the word *crochais* ('crucified'), the clearest evidence identified in this research that there was indeed a combination of cold-water immersion and the *crossfigell* posture in Celtic practice, the same combination that other scholars have claimed without citation (see chapter 6). The root word for *cinta* ('crimes') is the Old Irish word *cin*, which is usually used in a legal context.[315] The defensive tone suggests that the poet is trying to imply that Columba was not given to repeated acts of penance for any sort of personal fault or failing, gently separating into two categories the ascetic and the penitential aspects of such an intense vigil. At first sight, this word *crochais* suggests that crucifixion was the biblical prototype for Columba's immersion rather than baptism, but this point will be examined in more detail below since there was significant correspondence between these two biblical events in patristic biblical and liturgical exegesis.

A second reference to Columba's prayers on the beach and devotional bathing appears in another early poem. This survives as a citation inserted into a Middle Irish *Life of St Columba*, a late source written around 1160.[316] The text contains some early material originating from traditions outside Adomnán's more influential work, and also refers to Columba's bathing devotions:

> Nogebed na .lll. iarsin comatain ingainem natragai. ut dixit.

[315] dil.ie/9104 in the eDIL (Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language) digitised by the University of Ulster.
[316] Sharpe (1995), p 6, 91.

Na trí coicait tromm íntaire isinoidche bamor pian
isinliur fritoeb alban risiu doarcbad ingrían.
Glé frisleged uaisliu sæthu isingainem bamorsæth
slicht aasna trianetach baréill conidséted gæth.

Amonar aídche insin.

He would chant thrice fifty (psalms) after that, till morning in the sand of the strand, ut dixit [poeta] –

The three fifties – sore the watching – in the night – great was the pain.
In the sea beside Scotland before the sun had risen,
Clear ... in the sand, it was great labour,
The trace of his ribs through his raiment was manifest when the wind blew.

That was his nightwork.[317]

The detail about clothing clinging to his body and revealing the outline of his ribs suggests that it was thin material, perhaps drying on him after he wore it while conducting his vigil in the sea. The 'three fifties' refers to the psalms, which are often sung during vigils. The edition above leaves untranslated one obscure section of the text, and it can be noted here that the much later compendium of stories about Columba, Manus O'Donnell's *Beatha Coluimb Chille* (*Life of Columba*) from the 16th century, contains an extract of verse so similar it must be a version of the same lines, translated as:

Clearly he lay in the sand,
In his bed (Great was the toil);
The track of his ribs through his raiment
Was visible if the wind blew it.[318]

[317] *Three Middle-Irish Homilies on the Lives of Saints Patrick, Brigit and Columba*, ed. by Whitley Stokes (Calcutta: Privately published, 1877), p 124-5. This translation is preferred to that of William M. Hennessy, 'The Old Irish Life of St Columba', ed. by W. Skene (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1877); as Sharpe points out Hennessy's title has become the usual name associated with this text, although the language is more accurately described as Middle Irish.

[318] O'Kelleher, A. and Schoepperle, G. (eds) *Beatha Coluimb Chille* (Dublin: Urbana, 1918), p 440-1. The Irish text reads:
Gle noloighed is an gainemh in a lighe, ba mór saéth;
slicht a asna trén a edach, ba leir and con[id]seídeadh gaeth.

Columba appears to be prostrating himself on the beach after some time in the sea, a description that emphasises repeatedly the physical pain of this devotional activity. Sufficient detail is given across these two verse accounts to discern a number of elements in Columba's bathing devotions:

- At night
- Lying on the beach to recite psalms (either before or after bathing)
- Standing in the sea
- Adopting a cross posture
- Possibly wearing a thin item of clothing
- Enduring physical pain

These elements, scant though the descriptions are, do add up to a coherent account of a ritual behaviour that could be copied by a devout reader. Both accounts depict the same, austere interaction with natural water, which is an interesting counterpart to Columba's frequent direction of exorcism towards the element. Nowhere is there any suggestion of any sort of cleansing or rebirth, nor is there any hint of a harmonious or providential interaction with water and the creatures who dwell in it.

7.2: Cuthbert: devotional bathing in the anonymous account

With this early pattern in mind, it is interesting to turn to the anonymous account of Cuthbert's bathing after he arrives at the monastery of Coldingham, a celebrated incident in which the saint enters the sea one night to pray and afterwards is joined on the sand by two sea creatures, later identified by Bede as otters in the *VCP*, which attempt to dry and warm the saint's feet. The bathing sequence is cited here in full:

> non deserens relaxando sue constitutionis propositum, cepit nocte maritima loca circuire morem consuetudinis cantandi et uigilandi seruans... Ille uero homo Dei

> Cuðberht, inobstinata mente adpropinquans ad mare usque ad lumbare in mediis fluctibus, iam enim aliquando usque ad ascellas tumultauante et fluctuante tinctus est. Dum autem de mare ascendens, et in arenosis locis litoris flectens genua orabat, uenerunt statim post uestigia eius duo pusilla animalia maritima humiliter proni in terram, lambentes pedes eius, uolutantes tergebant pellibus suis, et calefacientes odoribus suis. Post seruitium autem et ministerio impleto accepta ab eo benedictione, ad cognatas undas maris recesserunt.
>
> [he] did not relax his habitual way of life, but began to walk about by night on the seashore, keeping up his custom of singing as he kept vigil... that man of God, approaching the sea with mind made resolute, went into the waves up to his loin-cloth; and once he was soaked as far as his armpits by the tumultuous and stormy sea. Then coming up out of the sea, he prayed, bending his knees on the sandy part of the shore, and immediately there followed in his footsteps two little sea animals, humbly prostrating themselves on the earth; and, licking his feet, they rolled upon them, wiping them with their skins and warming them with their breath. After this service and ministry had been received, they departed to their haunts in the waves of the sea.[319]

One of the main methodologies employed in the following section of research is to focus on the physical expression and spiritual intention of the ritual activity of the saints, the embodied reality of wading into a cold sea as a devotional act. By reading this text as a description of a physical activity that the reader might wish to copy allows the performative details of this ritual to come into focus, since the description provides sufficient information with which to reconstruct the bathing procedure.

Cuthbert is standing, perhaps silently, in waves up to the height of his loincloth – his waist – with a maximum swell that reaches up to his armpits, *ascellas*. This reference to armpits is a surprising choice of word, an unusually precise part of the anatomy against which to measure the reach of the water, not least because the armpits are usually concealed. Other immersion accounts listed in Appendix A demonstrate that deep water is indicated as reaching the shoulders or neck. Surely here the anonymous author uses this word 'armpits' because he is imagining Cuthbert standing with his arms outstretched, the waves rising up as high as his outstretched arms, and hence to his

[319] *VCA* II.3, p 80-81.

exposed armpits. This would also make the ritual a physically plausible exercise, the outstretched arms helping the saint to keep balance in a swell of up to about 50cm.

It seems clear from his inclusion of such intimate bodily details as armpits and loincloth that the anonymous monk is thinking in terms of an activity with which he is familiar and might well have practised personally. The adoption of the *crossfigell* crucifix posture for bathing would therefore appear to have another iteration in this text, and it is possible that the detail of the *lumbare*, loincloth, is intended to invoke further the image of a man crucified on the waves.[320]

This provides sufficient detail to compare the performance of Cuthbert's bathing with the brief scheme outlined above for Columba's bathing. Given that the two texts appear to be entirely independent of each other, and written in different languages, the two descriptions show a remarkable degree of similarity:

Columba's bathing (two early poems)	**Cuthbert's bathing (*VCA*)**
• At night	• At night
• Lying on the sand to recite psalms	• Singing psalms beforehand on the shore
• Standing in the sea	• Standing in the sea up to the waist
• Adopting a cross posture	• Adopting a cross posture
	• Kneeling on the sand to pray afterwards
• Possibly wearing a thin item of clothing	• Wearing a loincloth
• Ascetic emphasis on physical pain	
	• Feet dried afterwards by sea creatures

[320] This identification is uncertain, as the depiction of a full loincloth in early Christian art only started to become common from the 8th century onwards, according to R. Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts, from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p 188. Even so, nearly all early depictions of the crucifixion show Christ with some sort of covering confined to the area around his loins.

It may therefore be that this comparison reveals the basic shape of what might be called an Ionan bathing ritual, a pattern seemingly set by the early activity and/or descriptions of Columba's bathing and copied by Cuthbert in the anonymous account.

The anonymous author, however, adds another dimension to Cuthbert's ritual, the appearance of sea animals after the saint's immersion, a detail wholly absent from the cursory allusions to Columba's devotional bathing. Other scholars have attempted to interpret Cuthbert's bathing, and in a pattern familiar from previous chapters have identified monastic discipline and obedience as the primary motivations for the account, ignoring any cosmological implications. The account is set in a much wider hagiographical context that requires structured analysis in order to understand its full significance.

One of the problems presented by current scholarship on Cuthbert's immersion at Coldingham is that some commentators regard Bede and Anonymous' accounts to be broadly the same,[321] making it difficult to untangle the distinction scholars have made, if any, between Cuthbert himself, the anonymous author, and Bede. This section is followed by a specific study of the anonymous account and the way in which he frames the bathing as part of a wider missionary pattern. Only after this study can a scholar turn to Bede's rendition, following the methodological process used in previous chapters. As will be seen, Bede introduces significant changes to both the performative details of the bathing itself and the theological context in which it is placed.

To some degree, every scholar interprets Cuthbert's bathing and interaction with the sea creatures as a reflection of church hierarchy with an emphasis on monastic obedience, a

[321] Gusakova (2010), p 44-5; Alexander (2008), p 46.

means of instilling in monks the need for discipline: self-discipline through mortification, and discipline within a hierarchy through obedience to an abbot. This arises in part from the classification of cold water bathing as an ascetic exercise in self-discipline through mortification, an assumption whose origins were traced back to the French scholar Louis Gougaud at the start of chapter 6. It also arises from evidence found only in Bede's *Historia*, which records that the double monastery at Coldingham was having problems with discipline. Putting two and two together, some scholars have assumed that the abbess Aebbe summoned Cuthbert for help, although none of the hagiographies or Bede's *Historia* make this connection, and indeed the *Historia* contains no reference of any kind to Cuthbert's visit to Coldingham.[322]

Michael Herity's study of the landscape settings of early Irish Christian landscapes finds an association between hermits and places for cold water bathing, and is explicit about the influence of Gougaud's classificatory system:

> Gougaud quotes one piece of evidence relating that Evagrius stood naked in a well in winter during a sojourn in the desert in the cells in Nitria, Lower Egypt, about 382. It may well be that the widespread practice of immersions by early saints in Ireland, often apparently at night and often while reciting the psalms, is evidence of the existence of such a practice in the early western church. It may be too that the many examples of the custom in the Northumbrian church are due to influence from Ireland and Iona.[323]

This connection between Iona and Lindisfarne – between Columba and Cuthbert in other words – is an interesting and ultimately productive line of enquiry, although Herity himself does not pursue it in detail.

In a study notable for its use of allegorical interpretation to understand early Christian interaction with the landscape, Dominic Alexander (2008) argues that the detail of the

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[322] *HE* IV.25; this context is cited by scholars including Benedicta Ward, 'Cuthbert's Spirituality', in *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, ed. by Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, and Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1989), pp 65–76, p 71; Alexander (2008) alludes to the monastery's 'dubious atmosphere', p 46.
[323] Herity (1989), p 53.

sea creatures that come to dry Cuthbert's feet on the sand after his immersion can best be understood in terms of the pastor's position at the head of a monastic hierarchy.[324] Furthermore Alexander is perhaps the most focused of all scholars in pursuing the line that the incident is primarily concerned with advancing the position of the monastery in early medieval Britain, going so far as to claim that the animal interactions are not only a way of demonstrating monastic authority, but even ownership:

> Just as in the story of Cuthbert's otters, the 'companionship of animals' theme [in Columbanus and the squirrel] had been adapted from its Egyptian context, where it signalled alienation from humanity, to a context where it exemplified the perfect social relations of a good monastery where the abbot could rule absolutely. Moreover, the stories of the saints' control of animals had gone beyond the domination over animals expressed individually, to a claim of property over the 'wilderness' and its resources. The monks were colonising their deserts.[325]

Olga Gusakova has conducted a brief but productive study of Cuthbert's bathing ritual alongside Guthlac's interaction with birds. She does not discern the way in which Sulpicius Severus' material has been reworked by the authors, which is a new perspective presented in this thesis (chapter 5), but she does make several observations about the closeness with which animal behaviour is described in human terms. Once again, her conclusions are focused on the notion of obedience with a monastic hierarchy, and she does not perceive any significant differences between Anonymous and Bede:

> Though Bede made no significant alterations to the sequence of the events in [Anonymous' description of] this episode, some changes both in style and semantics have been noticed... However, the motif of servitude of animals to a saint was not introduced by Bede but was already present in the anonymous version that styles the sea animals' behaviour as *servitium* (service) and *ministerium* (ministry).[326]

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[324] Alexander (2008), p 46.
[325] *Ibid*. p 47-8.
[326] Gusakova (2010), p 44-5. Like Benedicta Ward, Gusakova also goes on to suggest monastic order was a model for a wider cosmological hierarchy in creation.

More recently scholars have discerned other suggestions of the cosmological significance of Cuthbert's bathing. Susan Crane's 2012 study of the role of animals in early hagiography criticises Alexander's anthropocentric bias:

> Hagiography's instruction ranges beyond lessons on human conduct to instruct as well concerning how creation is ordered and how it might be revised through faith.[327]

At this point in her study, Crane makes an important connection between Cuthbert's encounter with the sea creatures and established Christian ritual, working with the hagiographies on an individual basis. She notices that in the anonymous *vita* the creatures emerge from the sea to warm Cuthbert's feet immediately after a chapter in which Cuthbert himself offers a similar ministry of welcome to a stranger when he is serving at Ripon, specifically washing the guest's hands and feet, wiping them with towels and warming them. The mystery guest is subsequently revealed as an angel, leading Crane to perceive a reciprocity in the sea creatures' actions.[328] Crane initially offers the same interpretation of monastic obedience to explain the purpose of such incidents:

> Modifying the environment in these miracles entails obedience. Like hospitality, obedience is a crucial feature of Irish monasticism that comes to inform the animal encounters in the early Lives.[329]

However she acknowledges two problems with such an approach, first by reducing hagiography down to a single note, and second by reducing the animals to mere narrative devices that only display unexpected behaviour because of divine intervention. Crane's conclusions are somewhat problematic, since they use a modern frame of reference called 'dark ecology', a philosophical approach that seeks to remove the dualistic separation of nature and civilisation from historical and ecological enquiry:

> In presenting a natural world so continuous with human society, Irish hagiography's hierarchy of species looks less than vertical, tilting over toward

[327] Crane (2012), p 25.
[328] *Ibid*. p 28.
[329] *Ibid*. p 36.

> horizontality. Its animals make its humans look less uniquely social, less unique among animals, more entangled in their environments. Here it seems the Lives of Cuthbert and Columba resonate faintly across the ages with the environmental thought of Timothy Morton, Katherine Hayles, or Ursula Heise. These and other post-humanist interpreters urge that societies and natures, human and other animals, are intricately enmeshed in dynamic environments stretching outward and upward beyond our ken.[330]

Crane goes some way towards recovering the attitude outlined in the introduction of this thesis, that the early medieval mind did not have a distinct category of 'nature' that was defined in opposition to civilisation, but it is even so a self-aware exercise in recreating something that has been lost. Anonymous, Bede, Adomnán and others could not have been in any way attempting something similar to modern philosophers such as Timothy Morton because they could not attempt to struggle with the ideological baggage that came after them. They had their own systems of values, priorities, hierarchies and conceptual divisions that they applied to their world, and although it is common among scholars to detect something of an ecological shade to these early medieval writings, this is surely an anachronism. Modern ecological sensitivity might see something of itself reflected back in the texts of early medieval Britain, but this gaze does not penetrate beyond the surface to discover what motivated the writers themselves.

The most recent scholarship into the topic of early British saints and their interaction with the natural world is Britton Brooks' 2016 thesis. Although his thesis is careful to keep a focus on the world beyond the monastery boundaries, and is particularly keen to frame Bede's accounts in such wider terms, his main conclusion for the anonymous *vita* is that it does indeed relate to monastic obedience and its transformative effects:

> The most famous of all Cuthbert's Creation miracles in the VCA is therefore focused on the saint's ability to reorient Creation into its prelapsarian state within the postlapsarian world, specifically by means of obedience.[331]

[330] *Ibid*. p 39.
[331] Brooks (2016), p 22.

The commentators summarised here are surely right to detect that this interaction with the sea and its creatures carries significant weight in relation to the religious culture of its time, yet as with previous study of specific nature rituals, these interpretations once again remain closely embedded in the monastic milieu. Another way of framing the question that arises from such a narrow tropological focus is to ask why Cuthbert needed to wade into the sea and then interact with sea creatures in order to stress the need for obedience. This is a highly personal and physical engagement with the natural world that places great emphasis on the way in which the sea itself appears to respond and change following the performance of a Christian ritual in which it (or at least two of its creatures) are participants.

Crane has previously been cited for her insight into the ritual significance of nature interactions, identifying the pastoral paradigm of reprimand, pardon and instruction in the case of the penitent ravens (chapter 5 of this thesis). As has been seen, one can go further beyond her interpretation and discern the Irish model of the *Penitential*, a ministry to the natural world that would have been recognisably formal to a contemporary reader. In similar manner when it comes to the bathing incident as described by Anonymous, Crane comes closer than any other writer to identifying that there are monastic rituals which shape Cuthbert's interaction with animals on the seashore, suggesting that it is a recapitulation of the exercise of hospitality in the case of the foot-washing. The question therefore arises whether any more profound liturgical patterns can be discerned by probing deeper into Cuthbert's interaction with the sea creatures that dry his feet on the sand. The current interpretation of scholars, Crane included, that it demonstrates the dutiful performance of monastic hospitality merits careful consideration, particularly given the finding of previous research that nature rituals were part of a systematic missionary campaign.

7.3 Foot washing and Cuthbert's sea creatures

Looking back to the previous chapter in the anonymous *Vita sancti Cuthberti*, the scholars cited above have drawn the logical conclusion that the sea creatures which dry Cuthbert's feet are a wider recapitulation of his own ministry of monastic hospitality to an angelic visitor. It would appear in all scholarly accounts that the ritual of foot-washing and the more ephemeral notion of the seashore and monastic guesthouse as a liminal space of welcome[332] are the frames of reference which guided Cuthbert into the sea to perform his essentially monastic office.

Evidence presented in the previous chapter demonstrated that the exorcism and blessing of natural bodies of water drew on rituals that were initially developed in the context of baptism. Despite scholarship to the contrary, it is argued here that the same baptismal shapes can be discerned in the nature interactions at Coldingham too.

Scholars are undoubtedly correct to view Cuthbert's foot washing as a Christian ritual, but have only looked inside part of the hagiographies themselves to reach the conclusion that it is a recapitulation of monastic hospitality. A methodology arising from liturgical studies requires a wider search in order to identify an associated family of ritual activity, and indeed there is a much larger context for understanding foot washing, one that is widely attested in liturgical texts of the time, which is the enactment of foot washing as part of the formal baptismal ritual. This interpretation also aligns more closely with the notion that there was a missionary purpose to stories of Cuthbert's bathing.

Several significant liturgical texts relating to northern Europe from around 700 onwards include a ritual foot washing and drying that take place in addition to the immersion of

[332] Brooks (2016), p 19.

the candidate in the font. These sources are of a sufficiently diverse origin and geographical spread to indicate that this ritual, known as *pedilavium* in a formal liturgical context, was commonly practised across a large region of northern Europe. Significantly, in the liturgical progression this foot washing and drying takes place immediately after the candidate emerges from the baptismal waters, the same order in which Cuthbert's sea bathing and encounter with the creatures takes place.

Foot washing in connection with the baptismal rite is first mentioned in a canon of the Council of Elvira, which took place in southern Spain in *c*. 305-6. This passing reference occurs in an obscure passage about people who have paid a priest for a baptism, a practice which had been outlawed. Whitaker & Johnson (2003) cites this passage and provides a commentary in parentheses on difficulties with the text:

> It was agreed to amend the custom which has grown up, so that those who are baptized shall not make any payment, lest the priest seem to make a charge for what he received freely. And their feet shall not be washed by priests or clerics (*a sacerdotibus vel clericis*: but another reading is *a sacerdotibus sed clericis*, i.e. not by priests *but* by clerics).[333]

Although this text is unclear whether the actual foot washing should or should not be performed at all, it does at least describe this ritual in a baptismal context.[334]

In terms of the five early liturgical texts that pair baptism with foot washing, four of them come from northern Europe, and have been described in detail in chapter 6.[335] These include the two early Gallican texts, the *Missale Gothicum* and the incomplete *Missale Gallicanum vetus*. More significantly still are the two liturgical documents identified most closely with Celtic/Irish liturgy, the *Bobbio Missal* and the *Stowe Missal*, which both include foot washing after immersion in the font.[336] A fifth liturgical

[333] The Council of Elvira: Canon 48, in Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 154.
[334] Further discussed in Ferguson (2009), p 664.
[335] Owen M. Phelan, *The Formation of Christian Europe: The Carolingians, Baptism, and the Imperium Christianum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p 123.
[336] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 273 (Bobbio Missal), p 283 (Stowe Missal).

text that includes the *pedilavium* is the *Ambrosian Manual*, the Milanese text that, as described in chapter 6, shows close connections to Ambrose's theology and practice of baptism. In the 6th century foot washing was also included in the baptismal liturgy at Saint-Maurice (the Roman town Agaunum, in south-west Switzerland).[337]

This study therefore presents a different perspective on the sea animals' foot washing, running counter to the conventional view that it is to be understood in terms of the ministry of monastic welcome. As scholars have written, there is a correspondence between Cuthbert washing the feet of an angel and the sea animals subsequently returning the ministry to him, but it is argued here both of these are to be most fully understood in terms of the much larger Christian ritual of welcome as an induction into the church, which is expressed most intensely and physically by a range of baptismal procedures. The interpretation of foot washing as a simple monastic office of obedient hospitality misses not only this liturgical evidence, but also a large and detailed body of exegetical thought that saw the foot-washing ritual as something of greater theological symbolism.

By the fourth century, biblical commentators had noticed that the gospels do not describe any of the apostles as undergoing baptism, at least not of the kind dispensed by John the Baptist. The first writer to identify what he believed to be the apostles' baptism was the Syriac author Aphrahat (d. *c*. 345), bishop of Mar Mattai monastery, near Mosul in modern-day Iraq:

> our Saviour washed the feet of his disciples on Passover night, which is the mystery of baptism. For you know, Beloved, that the Saviour gave the true baptism on this night.[338]

[337] Ferguson (2009), p 846.
[338] Aphraat: *Demonstrations* 12.10, translation in Spinks (2006), p 52.

From this point onwards foot washing was to have a much enhanced status in the church, finding interesting and at times controversial expression in the overall baptismal service and in theological discussion of it.

The incident on Coldingham's shore bears the imprint of more liturgical influence than such a charmingly simple tale might otherwise suggest, touching on rituals with high theological principles at stake. As might be expected, Bede notices them. It has been demonstrated in previous research that nature rituals can be understood as a practical demonstration to the lay folk of Britain that Christianity can reverse the consequences of a sinful and fallen world. In Cuthbert's bathing they find their fullest expression as an act of cosmological healing. Once again Bede can be seen as articulating the theological significance most eloquently, but as will be seen next it is remarkable how far Anonymous himself frames the bathing incident as an instrument of conversion in a missionary campaign.

7.4 The missionary context for Cuthbert's bathing in the anonymous account

In their studies of the anonymous account of Cuthbert's bathing, scholars have looked back to find a correspondence with the saint's foot washing of a visitor in the previous chapter, but have not considered the chapters in the *vita* that immediately follow it. Here the evidence points to something altogether more missionary in nature, clearly connected to the research conducted above into the exorcism of natural water, demonstrating the abundant spirituality of the sea itself.

In the chapter immediately after the bathing incident, the anonymous author turns to a seemingly different narrative event:

> Alio quoque tempore de eodem monasterio quod dicitur Mailros, cum duobus fratribus pergens et nauigans ad terram Pictorum, ubi dicitur Niuduera regio prospere peruenerunt.

> At another time also, he went from the same monastery which is called Melrose with two brothers, and, setting sail for the land of the Picts, they reached the land called the region of the Niduari in safety.[339]

The opening sentence indicates that Anonymous is offering connections (*quoque*, *eodem*) between Cuthbert's previous journey from Melrose to Coldingham and the journey described in this following chapter. The juxtaposition of Cuthbert's bathing at Coldingham with a journey to the Picts, a land where Columba before him encountered such difficulty with pre-Christian narratives about natural bodies of water, is a connection that merits particularly careful study. The precise location of the Niduari Picts has been debated by scholars, the most exhaustive survey suggesting that somewhere in the region of Fife is the most likely candidate.[340] In this chapter of the *VCA* where Cuthbert visits these Picts, the monks are stranded by a storm during their journey north and are left on the shore on the day of Epiphany. For a second time in the hagiography, in adjacent chapters, Cuthbert is described as spending the night by the sea in prayer:

> Ille uero homo Dei pernoctans iuxta litora maris in oratione, peruenit ad eos mane in die Epiphanie Domini. Nam etenim post diem nataliciae Domini pergere ceperunt.
>
> But the man of God, after spending the night near the shore in prayer, came to them in the morning of the day of the Epiphany of the Lord, for they had started out after Christmas.[341]

The feast of the Epiphany is a striking time for Cuthbert to be stranded beside water. Although better known as a festival based on the Magi visiting the infant Jesus, Epiphany is also the date on which Christ's baptism is celebrated, a point to which Anonymous himself draws attention, in a speech attributed to Cuthbert:

> 'Puto enim quod aliquid nobis Dominus donauerit, ad celebrandum diem in quo magi cum muneribus adorauerunt eum, et in quo spiritus sanctus in specie

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[339] *VCA* II.4, p 82-3.
[340] Andrew Breeze, 'St Cuthbert, Bede, and the Niduari of Pictland', *Northern History*, 40.2 (2003), pp 365–68, at p 367-8.
[341] *VCA* II.4, p 82-3.

> columbe baptizato in Iordane super eum descendit, et in quo aquam in Chana Galileae uertit in uinum, ad confirmandam fidem discipulorum suorum.'
>
> 'For I think that the Lord will give us something to celebrate the day on which the Magi worshipped him with gifts and on which the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove descended upon him at his baptism in the Jordan, and on which he turned water into wine in Cana of Galilee to confirm the faith of his disciples.'[342]

Cuthbert is then described as leading his fellow monks down to the seashore, going ahead of them "as though he were the forerunner" in Colgrave's translation. This is a particularly resonant term with which to describe Cuthbert as he engages with the sea and prepares for a journey to the Picts, although it is not entirely clear that Anonymous is deliberately invoking a name used for John the Baptist. The Latin word he uses is the highly unusual *preuiator*, which can be translated as 'forerunner' but is not the precise word used in Hebrews 6: 19-20, the only biblical passage to describe John the Baptist with this title. Both the Vulgate and *Vetus Latina* versions of the Bible in use at the time of Anonymous employ the word *praecursor*. On firmer ground, however, the reference to the water being turned into wine at Cana might more clearly be seen as an evocation of the baptismal ritual, since it was mentioned during the preparation of the font in early liturgical texts, including the *Stowe Missal*, *Bobbio Missal* and *Ambrosian Manual*.[343]

The saint's interaction with the landscape continues as the monks find thrown up on the seashore three pieces of dolphin's flesh which appear to have been prepared by a knife. As in the previous chapter with the sea creatures drying his feet, the sea is once again a place where Cuthbert is served by creation. Further indication that baptismal imagery colours this scene appears in the description of the dolphin meat itself:

> Illi namque portauerunt et coxerunt, mirabilemque suauitatem carnis degustauerunt.

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[342] *VCA* II.4, p 82-5.
[343] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 281 for the *Stowe Missal*, p 271 for the *Bobbio Missal*, p 189 for The *Ambrosian Manual*.

> So they took them away and cooked them and enjoyed the wonderful sweetness of the flesh.[344]

The sweetness of the dolphin meat appears to be of some significance, and Bede's first rendition of this anecdote appears to be an amplification of Anonymous' meaning. In his metrical *vita* Bede describes the dolphin meat as *mellito... sapore*, ('tasting of honey').[345] The consumption of such sweet-tasting food is perhaps a sensory evocation of the experience of baptismal ritual, not least because the description of 'sweet' seems particularly laboured. Although there is no ethical or legal way to test this comment in the UK, anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that dolphin meat is anything but sweet.[346] The practice of giving honey to the newly baptised is attested as early as the Apostolic Traditions and continued in some baptismal formulae, although not universally recorded in early liturgical texts. It does not feature in the *Stowe Missal*, for example, but it does survive at least into the 6th century in continental Europe, attested by the baptismal commentary of John the Deacon.[347] The earlier *Bobbio Missal* concludes the baptismal liturgy with the phrase "take the sweet nourishment of your [God's] sacraments".[348] Whatever else can be concluded from this passage set on the sea shore, the language, imagery and allusions all seem far removed from the context of monastic discipline that supposedly holds the key to understanding the saint's nocturnal activity on the sea shore in the previous chapter.

The anonymous author continues his narration of Cuthbert's travels in the following chapter, turning to a description of his mission in the area of the river Teviot, which is south of the Forth of Firth. It is unclear whether this is a separate missionary journey

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[344] *VCA* II.4, p 84-5.
[345] *VCM* l. 288; Brooks (2016) p 98 discusses this briefly and refers to Lapidge (1996) who interprets this in the context of the biblical promised land, p 336.
[346] An internet search describes the taste as similar to liver, and not particularly pleasant.
[347] Ferguson (2009), p 768.
[348] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 274.

from his visit to the Niduari Picts where he encounters the dolphin meat. There is slight etymological evidence that these Niduari Picts can be connected to the river Nith, evidence that Breeze's survey cited above describes as "possible but anomalous".[349] The river Nith is in the same area as the river Teviot, 35 miles to the west, which would place Cuthbert's discovery of the dolphin flesh in the context of this same journey to baptise the people of the region. So saying, it is all but impossible to imagine how a journey from Coldingham to the river Nith could involve a sea journey, since they are both inland, while Pictland is conventionally considered to lie to the north of the Forth of Firth.

Cuthbert's missionary visit to Pictland has curiously not resulted in any precise descriptions of conversion, a detail that is brought into focus by the contrasting description of his work among the people in the region of the river Teviot:

> Alia die proficiscebat iuxta fluuium Tesgeta tendens in meridiem inter montana docens rusticanos et baptizabat eos.
>
> One a certain day, he was going along the river Teviot and making his way southward, teaching the country people and baptizing them.[350]

As mentioned, Adomnán does not mention Columba's apparently successful conversion of the Picts either, using instead only curiously euphemistic phrases such as 'God was glorified' after Columba expelled the beast from the river Ness and raised a boy from the dead.[351] Cuthbert too has gone to the region – for an unspecified purpose – in a sequence of the narrative that Anonymous colours with baptismal imagery, ritual detail and an explicit reference to Christ's baptism beforehand and a description of actual baptismal activity afterwards. Yet no actual conversion is described.

[349] Breeze (2003), p 366.
[350] *VCA* II.5, p 84-5.
[351] *Vita Columbae* II.27, II.32.

One final incident concludes the series of water-themed narratives in this chapter, when Cuthbert asks a boy accompanying them if he has any food with him. When the boy says no, Cuthbert foretells that an eagle flying overhead will bring their meal, and it subsequently leaves a large fish by the bank of the river. Cuthbert tells the boy to give some of the fish to the bird, not merely so it could participate in a meal but because he interprets the bird's behaviour in leaving the fish as "fasting" (*ieiunanti*). Once again an animal is taking part in Christian ritual.

It is therefore argued here that the interpretation of Cuthbert's bathing at Coldingham as a recapitulation of monastic hospitality fails to take account of a much larger narrative that places an intense interaction with nature in a missionary context, in which church ritual up to and including elements of the baptismal liturgy spills out into the landscape. The sea creatures that dry Cuthbert's feet, the dolphin meat that washes up on the shore, and the fish provided by an eagle are a connected series of interactions with the natural world that cluster around water features, each incident demonstrating a providential and benign relationship between humans, natural water and the creatures which dwell in and around it, a relationship that is revealed by the pivotal function of the holy man. The fact that these increasingly lead to a description of missionary work and then the performance of actual baptism is missed by other scholars, who focus on the disciplinary aspects of cold water bathing and dutiful foot washing alone. It is clear that Anonymous has shaped his narrative to create a consistent thematic emphasis on ritual interactions with the landscape, all of which serve to promote the benign agency of water.

Although all these nature interactions of Cuthbert in the anonymous *vita* have didactic potential, it is also clear that they collectively amount to a campaign of missionary travel that is articulated through and memorialised in the landscape itself. This, then, is a different context in which to place Cuthbert's bathing ritual: not as an ascetic act of

mortification, nor as a memorable way to promote monastic hospitality and hence obedience, but as physical demonstration that a saint's presence would transform water into an element overflowing with providential abundance. It was, in other words, a direct rebuttal of the spiritual associations that so greatly vexed Columba on his own journeys into Pictland, associations that depicted natural bodies of water and their creatures as inherently harmful to humans.

This research therefore proposes a different context for the bathing rituals from previous scholarly explanation: it was a way of demonstrating that saints were able to bathe safely in open water because God could reach every part, redeem every part of creation. The baptismal ritual served as the ultimate embodiment of this missionary theology, the mission to challenge inhibitions about natural water finding physical expression as the saints placed their own bodies into the picture.

What is also notable is the degree of hardship which both Cuthbert and Columba before him endure in these encounters with the deep. Although ultimately redemptive in conclusion, the sense of physical exertion and potential suffering is never far from the narrative, a hard-won campaign in the face of grave spiritual and physical danger. Furthermore, the performative details of all the rituals described in the texts never amount to a full immersion. When they do enter the water, Columba and Cuthbert adopt a cross-shaped posture to stand in the sea, which as Anonymous makes clear requires waist-deep water, and both of them also retain some form of clothing. For all their whole-hearted engagement with the elements, the campaign was not without its perils, and it is possible to discern a degree of reservation accordingly.

7.5 Bede's two versions of Cuthbert's bathing ritual at Coldingham

At this point it is necessary to turn to Bede's account of the bathing incident at Coldingham to examine the way he uses, amplifies and alters the significant details

identified through study of the anonymous narrative. The methodology employed productively above to discern the crucifix posture of Cuthbert's bathing can be applied to Bede, and indeed some scholars have already skirted around the potential of this methodology. Michael Lapidge makes brief reference to the way in which Bede describes Cuthbert's bathing, and comes close considering the practicalities of the act described, before dismissing it as an unlikely literary fiction based in large part on Virgil's *Georgics*:

> When they get to the sea, Cuthbert submerges himself up to the neck (*collo tenus... marmoreo*). In the prose *Life*, he goes in no further than his loin-cloth; the submersion as far as his 'marble-white neck' owes more to Virgil (Georgics IV,523) than to reality, for it cannot have been easy to chant hymns while standing up to the neck in water.[352]

Despite his preference for a literary interpretation, Lapidge does however notice that different accounts of Cuthbert's bathing describe different depths of immersion. This is one of the key components of this study, a reconstruction of what it would look and feel like if one were to copy the contrasting descriptions of Cuthbert's bathing ritual. Quite apart from the fact that this approach is in keeping with the nature of hagiography as a paradigm to be emulated by the faithful, it demonstrates that the narrative conjures up a more visceral, compelling and memorable scene, one that readers and listeners would appreciate at least as much as they might enjoy a literary allusion to classical verse.

Beyond this point about the different depths of immersion, scholars have not interrogated the differences between the ways in which Cuthbert's bathing ritual is described in the three hagiographies, the anonymous account and Bede's two subsequent accounts. The identical narrative elements of sea bathing, prayers and foot drying from sea creatures demonstrate that the episodes have much in common, but hagiography is more than a literary experience, provoking the reader to engage physically and mentally

[352] Michael Lapidge, 'Bede's Metrical Vita S. Cuthberti', in Bonner et al. (1989), pp 77-93, at p 92.

with the exemplary behaviour presented to them. It is also a methodological error to conflate different accounts without examining the ways in which they are reworked. As seen in chapter 5 above, the reworking of material in Sulpicius Severus' *Dialogi* by three authors in Britain yields great insight into their different priorities and interpretative models. Bede's description of the bathing event is as follows:

> At ille egressus monasterio sequente exploratore descendit at mare, cuius ripae monasterium idem superpositum erat. Ingressusque altitudinem maris, donec ad collum usque et brachia unda tumens assurgeret, peruigiles undisonis in laudibus tenebras noctis exegit.
>
> Cuthbert left the monastery with the spy following him and went down to the sea, above whose shores the monastery was built; going into the deep water until the swelling waves rose as far as his neck and arms, he spent the dark hours of the night watching and singing praises to the sound of the waves.[353]

If one were to re-enact this description of this bathing ritual, it would result in an experience very different to that of the anonymous account. Bede's earlier metrical version of the *vita* is briefer than either the anonymous account or Bede's later prose account when it comes to describing the actual immersion and accompanying prayers on the sand. Its few details do however agree much more closely with Bede's prose version rather than the anonymous text: Cuthbert is singing, immersed in the sea up to his neck, and his state of dress is not described:

> Ad mare deueniunt; collo tenus inditus undis
> Marmoreo, Cuthbertus agit sub carmine noctem.
> Egreditur ponto genibusque in litore fixis
> Expandit geminas supplex ad sidera palmas.[354]
>
> They arrive at the sea; submerged in the waves as far as his marble-white neck, Cuthbert spends the night chanting. He emerges from the sea and, fixing his knees on the sea shore, he extends his two hands to the heavens in supplication.[355]

It is notable that the bathing ritual as described by Bede has no suggestion of either a crucifix posture or loincloth, or indeed any clothing at all. Rather than standing in the

[353] *VCP* ch. X, p 188-9.
[354] *VCM* ll. 223-6.
[355] Translation from Lapidge (1989), p 91.

water waist deep, Cuthbert immerses himself fully, and is also said to sing or chant to the sound of the waves. Despite Lapidge's reservations about the practicality of this procedure, it is in fact eminently achievable, but it would result in a very different experience to the ritual as imagined by Anonymous, not least because it would be impossible for Cuthbert to maintain any sort of crucifix posture while effectively floating at the edge of his depth.

As will be seen, Bede goes on to provide an exegetical framework to the incident that further amplifies these findings, indicating that there were profound theological implications attached to the actions involved in devotional immersion.

7.6 Two families of bathing ritual: partial and complete

A table that lists the different elements in the descriptions of devotional bathing rituals highlights clearly just how far Bede's scheme deviates from what has been uncovered by the research into the Ionan bathing ritual. Even though Anonymous and Bede are supposedly describing the same event, the ritual elements of the immersion itself as described by Anonymous are identical to the evidence regarding Columba's immersions, and different in every respect from the immersion as it is described by Bede, apart from the night-time setting.

	Columba's bathing (two early poems)	**Cuthbert's bathing: Anonymous (*VCA*)**	**Cuthbert's bathing: Bede (*VCP*)**	**Cuthbert's bathing: Bede (*VCM*)**
Time of devotion	At night	At night	At night	At night
Activity before bathing	Prayer	Singing and walking	-	-
Posture while bathing	Cross posture	Cross posture	-	-
Depth of immersion	-	Up to waist	Up to neck	Up to neck
Dress while bathing	Thin material?	Loincloth	-	-
Activity while bathing	-	-	"Watching and singing praises to the sound of the waves"	Chanting (*carmine*)
Duration	-	Brevity implied ("once he was soaked as far as his armpits")	"He spent the dark hours of the night"	"Spends the night" (*agit noctem*)
Activity after bathing	Chanted psalms on the sand	Kneeled on the sand to pray	Kneeled on the sand to pray	Kneels and prays with arms raised to the heavens

It is interesting that so many other details of the seashore incident are the same in Bede and Anonymous: prayers on the sand, the ministering sea creatures, the spying monk. Yet when it comes to the actual immersion itself they describe very different types of bodily experience. Several of these differences will be considered below. Bede's addition of psalm singing in the water and omission of Cuthbert's loincloth are consistent features of both of his versions, despite the brevity of the metrical *vita*. The crucifixion posture of the Anonymous and Columba bathing accounts also merits consideration as part of the overall ritual expression.

The first difference, therefore, is the introduction of psalm singing in the sea. This detail replaces the emphasis on crucifixion discernible in Anonymous and explicit in the early account of Columba's bathing. It marks a shift away from this ritual as an ascetic act of physical suffering and moves instead towards an act of praise, more of a celebratory than a penitential act.

An initial attempt to interpret this singing in the light of baptismal patterns draws something of a blank: none of the four early medieval liturgies cited above includes psalm singing or chanting at or around the moment of immersion, although the *Stowe Missal* includes a chant of five verses from the psalms after the foot washing.[356] Another liturgical text, however, stands out as an interesting match with Bede's description. The *Gelasian Sacramentary* notes that the baptismal candidate's progression down to the font is accompanied by singing: *Inde descendis cum litania ad fontem* ('Then a litany is chanted while you go down to the font').[357] For reasons that will be further considered below, this liturgical text appears to agree most closely with Bede's understanding not only of the components of devotional bathing as modelled on baptism, but also on his understanding of the actual baptism itself. Other scholars have separately noticed a correspondence between the *Gelasian Sacramentary* and Bede's descriptions of performative Christian acts away from a church context.[358] The lack of any surviving liturgical texts relating to baptism in Anglo-Saxon England in the pre-

[356] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 283.
[357] *Gelasian Sacramentary* XLIV, Whitaker and Johnson (2003), p 233.
[358] Of particular note on the equivalence between Bede and the *Gelasian Sacramentary* is Éamonn Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood : Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the Dream of the Rood Tradition* (London: The British Library and University of Toronto Press, 2005), p 231, in which he has convincingly demonstrated using the *Historia ecclesiastia* (III.2) that Bede describes king Oswald praying at the foot of a cross before the battle of Heavenfield by borrowing anachronistically from an 8th century form of prayer based on the Holy Week liturgy, the closest liturgical match being the *Gelasian Sacramentary* (Wilson, H. A. (ed.) *The Gelasian Sacramentary: Liber sacramentorum Romanae ecclesiae*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), p 75).

Viking period is a significant hindrance to knowing in greater detail how Bede and others of his time would have conceived of the baptismal ritual,[359] but the *Gelasian Sacramentary* is perhaps as close a match as can be found. It is highly unlikely to represent a precise copy of the liturgies that Bede used, and he would undoubtedly have known of other formulae that were practised and textually recorded in Celtic Christian communities.

Cuthbert's chanting in the sea is also described by one particularly unusual word in Bede's prose text that appears to suggest a certain degree of harmonisation between the singing saint and the sea itself:

> Ingressusque altitudinem maris, donec ad collum usque et brachia unda tumens assurgeret, peruigiles undisonis in laudibus tenebras noctis exegit.
>
> going into the deep water until the swelling waves rose as far as his neck and arms, he spent the dark hours of the night watching and singing praises to the sound of the waves.[360]

The unusual word is *undisonis*, a poetic compound adjective meaning 'making sounds like water [or waves]', a word which appears to be used by Bede only in this one instance.[361] Is it possible that this implies Cuthbert was using the waves to punctuate his psalm singing? The frequency of ocean waves varies but is somewhere in the order of every 10 seconds. It would be perfectly possible to recite lines of a psalm to this rhythm, or alternatively to use the sound of each wave breaking as a responsory to a psalm or chant in the manner that an 'Alleluia' is proclaimed before or after each line. Britton Brooks (2016) has convincingly identified Psalm 94, which served as the Invitatory to start the Night Office at the time of Bede, as the most likely candidate for

[359] Foot (1992), pp 171-192, at p 175.
[360] *VCP* ch. 10, p 188-9.
[361] Tobias Reinhardt, Michael Lapidge, and J. N. Adam, *Aspects of the Language of Latin Prose* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p 329.

the saint's song.[362] This does not include an Alleluia responsory, but even so breaking waves could be used to mark alternating lines or pauses in the psalm.

Visiting what is considered to be the likely site of Cuthbert's bathing below the headland at Coldingham where traces of the Celtic monastery can be seen, it is noticeable even with a relatively calm sea that the breaking waves echo in this rocky inlet, now known as Horsecastle bay. Despite Lapidge's doubts about the practicality of this performance, the sound of breaking waves would serve as an aid to the devotional focus, helping the bather to keep time.

The second point of difference under scrutiny relates to the disappearance of Cuthbert's loincloth in Bede's account of the bathing ritual, which is accompanied and contextualised by the saint's fuller immersion of his body under the waves. Why does Bede see fit to discreetly remove this garment from the scene? Looking at Bede's other writings on this matter, in addition to the weight of cultural evidence surrounding bathing practices, it seems highly likely that he considers nudity to be the conventional way to bathe outdoors. He is also demonstrably reserved about referring to this explicitly.

In a comment unexplored by scholars, Bede begins his *Historia ecclesiastica* with the briefest of references to the bathing culture of the English. When describing the island of Britain in geographical terms, he mentions the presence of hot and salt springs, and then adds a curiously precise comment about the way in which people bathe – or ought to bathe – in them:

> Habet fontes salinarum, habet et fontes calidos, et ex eis fluuios balnearum calidarum omni aetati et sexui per distincta loca iuxta suum cuique modum accommodos.

[362] Brooks (2016), p 89-90.

> The land possesses salt springs and warm springs and from them flow rivers which supply hot baths, suitable for all ages and both sexes, in separate places and adapted to the needs of each.[363]

Such an aside offers a rare sociological observation of everyday life in Bede's time, and provides a context for bathing culture more generally. The only practical explanation for such segregated bathing facilities is that participants were naked in these outdoor baths. Nudity for bathing is something that historians consider to be near universal practice until the early modern period, criticised at times by contemporary Christian moralists only on account of the mixed-sex nature of facilities.[364] Why Bede feels the need to add such an aside about the segregated arrangements raises a question as to what the alternative might be, since it would presumably go without saying if this were the universal custom of his time. It might be that Bede is the first in a long line of churchmen and moralists trying to encourage or reinforce an end to mixed-sex naked bathing at these hot springs, since a similar appeal to the people of Bath can be glimpsed on and off over the following millennium, a succession of somewhat exasperated injunctions surviving from later medieval and early modern times in an attempt to persuade men and women either to bathe separately or to wear some form of bathing attire.[365]

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[363] *HE* I.1, p 14-15.

[364] Barbara Górnicka, *Nakedness, Shame, and Embarrassment: A Long-Term Sociological Perspective* (Wiesbaden: Springer Nature, 2016), p 130.

[365] In 1449 bishop Thomas Beckington decreed that all bathers above the age of puberty should be 'decorously clad', complaining that locals not merely entered the water naked themselves but even forcibly undressed anyone who attempted to use the baths with clothes on (Orme (1983) p 38). William Turner in a treatise of 1562 urged segregated bathing. A thousand years after Bede described the locals' bathing habits at Bath, John Wood the Elder in the 18th century felt moved to complain: "The Baths were like so many Bear Gardens, and Modesty was entirely shut out of them; people of both sexes bathing by day and night naked." Thermae Bath Spa (2015) History of the Spa. Available at: https://www.thermaebathspa.com/news-info/about-the-spa/spa-history/ (Accessed: 23/8/2017).

The continuum between bathing customs and ritual cleansing is well attested in early Christian literature and accepted by scholars as one of the factors that helped to define baptismal practice.[366] In addition to the examples cited in chapter 6 of an elision between washing for hygiene and ritual washing, numerous other examples can be found in texts arising from early medieval Britain, including the detailed description of St Etheldreda washing with her community in hot water only before important holy days, and Wilfrid's nightly washing to keep his body *sine pollutione* ('unspotted').[367] Bede also talks in terms of washing for both hygiene and spiritual purposes connected to the *pedilavium*, in a passage of some significance for this research. Bede makes a distinction between daily bathing and the one-off act of immersion in the font, part of a continuum in which foot washing appears to sit somewhere in the middle, representing both physical and spiritual cleansing. The commentary comes in Bede's homily on Maundy Thursday foot washing:

> Vbi aperte monstratur quod haec lauatio pedum spiritalem carnis et animae purificationem sine qua ad consortium Christi perueniri non potest insinuat...
>
> *Quos lotus est*, inquit, *non indiget nisi ut pedes lauet sed est mundus totus*. Manifeste denuntiat quod lauatio pedum illa remissionem quidem peccatorum designaret non tamen eam quae semel in baptismate datur sed illam potius qua cotidiani fidelium reatus sine quibus in hac uita non uiuitur cotidiana eius gratia mundantur. Pedes namque quibus incedentes terram tangimus ideoque eos a contagione pulueris sicut reliquum corpus inmunes custodire nequimus ipsam terrenae inhabitationis necessitatem designant...

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[366] Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), p 8-9; also Ferguson (2009), especially p 34-6 (Jewish precedents), p 330, 341-2, 478 and 858-9 for classical bathing customs.

[367] *HE* IV.19 p 392-3 *raroque in calidis balneis praeter inminentibus sollemniis maioribus, uerbi gratia paschae pentencostes epiphaniae, lauari uoluerit, et tunc nouissima omnium, lotis prius suo suarumque ministrarum obsequio ceteris quae ibi essent famulis Christi* '[Etheldreda] would seldom take a hot bath except just before the greater feasts, such as Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany, and then last of all, after the other handmaidens of Christ who were present had washed themselves, assisted by herself and her attendants.'; for Wilfrid Eddius Stephanus: *Vita sancti Wilfridi* ch. 21, p 44-5, discussed in more detail below.

> qui ablutus est fonte baptismatis in remissionem omnium peccatorum non indiget rursus immo non potest eodem modo ablui
>
> Here it is clearly being pointed out that the washing of the feet implies the spiritual purification of body and soul without which we cannot arrive at fellowship with Christ...
>
> [Jesus] said, '*The person who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, and he is completely clean*'. [Jesus] is giving clear notice that this washing of the feet indicates pardoning of sins, and not only that which is given once in baptism, but in addition that by which the daily guilty actions of the faithful, without which no one lives in this life, are cleaned by his daily grace. Our feet, by which we move about [and] touch the ground (and for this reason we cannot keep them free from contact with dirt, as [we can] the rest of our bodies) signify the necessity of our living upon the earth...
>
> the person who has been cleansed in the baptismal font and [has received] pardon for all his sins has no need to be cleansed again; moreover he cannot be cleansed again in the same way.[368]

This homily will be further examined below, but for now it can be said that Bede clearly regards all forms of ablution as connected, even baptism not entirely distinct from the practicalities of daily hygiene.

Bede's apologetic tone about the use of rivers for outdoor baptism in the early church has been noted earlier in this thesis (chapter 2), again indicating a delicacy about the public nudity this would have entailed, an interpretation greatly encouraged by the fact that king Edwin is recorded as hastily building a small and temporary wooden structure for his personal experience of the ritual. These two types of baptismal facility – the river and the wooden oratory – are juxtaposed by Bede himself, recorded in the same chapter of the *Historia ecclesiastica*. Once again he fails to mention explicitly the participants' state of undress.[369] A final indication that Bede prefers to avoid mentioning nudity directly comes in his reworking of an incident in the anonymous *Vita sancti Cuthberti*, which describes the young Cuthbert engaging in nude gymnastics with other boys:

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[368] Bede: Homily II.5, *CCSL* 122, p 216-7; translation *Bede the Venerable: Homiles on the Gospels: Book Two Lent to the Dedication of the Church*, ed. by Lawrence Martin and David Hurst (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications Inc, 1991), p 46-7.
[369] *HE* II.14.

> scurilitatem agere ceperunt. Alii namque stantes nudi uersis capitibus contra naturam deorsum ad terram
>
> They began thereupon to indulge in a variety of games and tricks; some of them stood naked, with their heads turned down unnaturally towards the ground[370]

Bede rewrites this by removing the reference to nudity and instead amplifying the emphasis by Anonymous on the unnatural gymnastic movements:

> sicut ludentium leuitas solet contra congruum naturae statum uariis flexibus membra plerique sinuarent
>
> in accordance with the usual thoughtlessness of children at play, most of them were twisting their limbs into various unnatural contortions[371]

Bede has to go through contortions, literally and figuratively, in order that his version makes sense without the nudity, which he also omits in his briefer rendition of this incident in the metrical *vita*. Whatever Bede's personal views on the need for discretion about the naked body, it is demonstrably the case that later medieval writers and illustrators assumed that Bede's account of the Coldingham bathing incident involved Cuthbert entering the sea when naked and submerged up to his neck, depicted both in illuminated manuscripts and in a Middle English translation of the *Life* dating from *c*. 1450:

> How cuthbert, with'in Þe se,
> Vp to Þe nek naked stode he[372]

Cuthbert's bathing is illustrated in the late 12th century Durham manuscript Yates Thompson MS 26, a document which also includes Bede's prose *vita* of the saint on which the artist has based the illumination (see below).

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[370] *VCA* I.3, p 64-5.
[371] *VCP* ch. 1, p 156-7.
[372] *The Life of St Cuthbert in English Verse*, ed. by J. T. Fowler (Durham: Surtees Society Publications, 1889), p 49.

Illustration from Yates Thompson MS (fourth quarter of the 12th century) showing Cuthbert bathing naked and up to his neck (bottom left) and having his feet dried on the sand by otters afterwards (bottom right), while a monk from Coldingham monastery looks on from the cliffs. Image © British Library Board, BL *Yates Thompson MS 26*, f. 24r

The comparative table in Appendix A of all known incidents of devotional bathing in the early church highlights the curious fact that all bathing and swimming incidents connected to Ionan monasteries appear to involve the bather wearing some form of clothing. This includes one of Columba's missionary party to Pictland, the monk Luigne moccu Min who is instructed to swim across the river Ness to attract the monster and keeps his tunic around him before diving in.[373] All other devotional bathing incidents

[373] *Vita Columbae* II.27.

recorded in Britain, Ireland and northern Europe either make no reference to clothing or explicitly describe the bather as naked. Indeed not a single other reference to clothed bathing or swimming in everyday circumstances can be found in an intensive search of the literature of the period beyond this cluster of evidence linked to Ionan foundations, and nor is any evident in material culture.[374]

If one were to revive this practice of devotional immersion in natural water, the most comfortable and appealing would undoubtedly be the one Bede describes, rather than the crucifix posture of the Ionan ritual. Indeed another point about this emerges when considering the ritual in terms of a bodily enactment. The anonymous author's bathing ritual is described in terms that would only be appropriate for a man: standing waist deep in an outdoor setting wearing a loincloth is not a unisex ritual. Bede's vision on the other hand is unisex, the body wholly embraced and concealed by the waters without any reservation or discrimination. If it were true that the bathing ritual had been performed by Cuthbert in order to teach the Coldingham community to mortify their flesh – a point that has been questioned by this research – the anonymous monk of Lindisfarne clearly only had the men of this double monastery in mind.

7.7 The depth of immersion: contrasts between Ionan and other descriptions

The following topic of investigation is connected to the bather's state of dress or undress, since it relates to depth of immersion described in the different bathing incidents. Although the difference between waist-high bathing and full-body immersion might seem minor, it is apparent that other descriptions of bathing incidents from the literature of the period place considerable emphasis on this point. In the evidence

[374] Orme (1983), p 38 comments that all medieval depictions of bathers show nude figures. The only possible exception to this practice (also compiled by Orme, p 8-9, 11-12) are warrior swimming narratives where the hero enters the sea or lake wearing full armour, including three incidents in *Beowulf*. Such a motif, perhaps coincidentally, tends to depict water as a place of physical danger.

presented above, Ionan bathing involves immersing only the lower half of the body: Anonymous is explicit about this point and the description of Columba standing in a crucifix posture would only be possible in waist-high water.

Bede himself describes one other celebrated act of devotional bathing at an Ionan monastic foundation which appears to sit more or less half way between the Ionan bathing ritual and his description of Cuthbert's bathing. This relates to the monk Dryhthelm, who entered into a life of extreme penance after receiving a vision of the afterlife:

> Et quia locus ipse super ripam fluminis erat situs, solebat hoc creber ob magnum castigandi corporis affectum ingredi, ac saepius in eo supermeantibus undis inmergi; sicque ibidem quamdiu sustinere posse uidebatur, psalmis uel precibus insistere, fixusque manere ascendente aqua fluminis usque ad lumbos, aliquando et usque ad collum; atque inde egrediens ad terram, numquam ipsa uestimenta uda atque algida deponere curabat, donec ex suo corpore calefierent et siccarentur.
>
> as his retreat was on the banks of the river, he often used to enter it in his great longing to chastise his body, frequently immersing himself beneath the water; he would remain thus motionless, reciting prayers and psalms for as long as he could endure it, while the water of the river came up to his loins and sometimes to his neck. When he came out of the water, he would never trouble to take off his cold, wet garments until the warmth of his body had dried them.[375]

Dryhthelm's celebrated act of devotion took place close to the period Bede was writing, *c*. 700, which considerably reduced Bede's latitude for creative reworking. Furthermore, the ritual was witnessed by a well-known acquaintance of Bede, Ethelwald, who had been Dryhthelm's abbot at Melrose and was bishop of Lindisfarne at the time Bede wrote the *Historia ecclesiastica*, a point Bede himself mentions. Bede would have been obliged to stick closely to the known historical details of this famous act of immersion, but a close reading reveals that even so he prevaricates about the bodily enactment. He describes both a half-way and a full-body immersion, 'up to the loins and sometimes up to the neck', which corresponds very obviously to the contrasting descriptions of the

[375] *HE* V.12, p 496-9.

depth of Cuthbert's bathing in the anonymous account and Bede's account. The river Tweed runs alongside the site of Dryhthelm's monastery, at Old Melrose, and appears from above to be fairly shallow along this stretch, running rapidly over a rocky riverbed. Perhaps it has deeper pools elsewhere, but even so it is notable that Bede considers the depth of immersion significant enough to be covered by two options. It is also notable how Bede denotes this depth of immersion. Whereas the anonymous author uses the word *lumbare* ('loincloth') to indicate waist-high bathing for Cuthbert, Bede opts instead for the anatomical *lumbos* ('loins') when describing the similar depth of water for Dryhthelm, somewhat obscuring his state of dress, even though Bede goes on to describe how Dryhthelm wore his dripping wet clothes after he bathed and let them dry on his body. This might be the first record of an obscure form of cold-water mortification in which the saint bathes in cold water and, separately, dips their clothes in cold water, said to be practised by St Patrick[376] and possibly by St Brynach.[377]

Despite Bede's attempt to introduce some ambiguity about the ritual performance of this bathing, he is very clear that it can be categorised decisively in terms of bodily penance, precipitated by Dryhthelm's visions of the afterlife:

> solebat hoc creber ob magnum castigandi corporis affectum ingredi
>
> he often used to enter it in his great longing to chastise his body[378]

---

[376] *The Most Ancient Lives of Saint Patrick, Including the Life by Jocelin*, ed. by James O'Leary (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1880), ch. 184, p 334.

[377] The Latin is unclear: *crebrisque extenuebat vigiliis carnis insolentiam, vestium cohibebat asperitate gelidaque, quam subilat cotidie in aquae in frigidatione*, translated in *Lives of the Cambro British Saints*, ed. by W. J. Rees (Llandsvery: Longman & Co, 1853) as 'he diminished the insolence of the flesh by frequent watchings, he restrained the luxury of clothing by cold treatment, dipping it daily in the coldest water' (p 295), and in *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, ed. by A. W. Wade-Evans (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1944) as 'He checked the insolence of the flesh with the roughness of his garments, and in the chilliness of cold water which he entered daily' (p 10-11). Wade-Evans assumes that *subilat* should be *subibat*, although could it be derived from *sublato*, 'to take off'?

[378] *HE* V.12, p 496-9.

This context is entirely lacking in Bede's description of Cuthbert's bathing, notwithstanding attempts by later scholars to infer a dimension of mortification due to the sinful behaviour of the monks and nuns at Coldingham. Bede also describes psalm singing during the immersion, which again is absent in all accounts emanating from Ionan sources of bathing rituals.

Dryhthelm's bathing routine offers no suggestion of a two-way interaction with the water apart from a need to break the ice as he entered the river during winter. This then appears to be a purely ascetic form of immersion, and it is a ritual embodied in ways much closer to the waist-high Ionan bathing ritual, despite Bede's clear efforts to introduce some ambiguity.

Surprisingly, the other writer of the period who draws attention to the depth of water for devotional bathing is Adomnán. Even though he barely mentions Columba's ritual bathing beyond his brief washing in the well at Invermoriston, in another text he shows detailed interest in the practice. Indeed Adomnán's description provides the most explicit biblical authority to be found in any early literature for devotional bathing, substantial and overt evidence that ritualised immersion is to be understood as a recapitulation of the baptismal prototype of Jesus. The evidence appears in his book *De locis sanctis*, a text that recounts the adventures around the Holy Land of a bishop from Gaul called Arculf. In his description of the place of Jesus' own baptism, it is notable how far his description of the river Jordan concentrates on the depth of the water:

> sicut Arculfus refert, qui ad eundem peruenerat locum hucque et illuc per eundem transnatuauit fluuium, in eodem sacrosancto loco lignea crux summa infixa est, iuxta quam aqua usque ad collum longissimi uenit stantis uiri aut alio in tempore nimiae siccitatis aquis inminutis ad mamellas usque
>
> as Arculf relates, who reached the actual spot and swam to and fro across the stream, in this sacred spot a tall wooden cross is implanted. Beside it the water

> comes up as far as the neck of a very tall man standing, or, at other times of great drought, to his breast.[379]

If there were any sort of disagreement about the conventional depth used for ritual immersion, as this research has demonstrated above for devotional bathing and will further examine for baptismal procedures in chapter 8, Adomnán goes out of his way to demonstrate that Jesus himself was baptised in neck-deep water. This is the same measurement that appears in Bede's descriptions of ritual bathing.

Underlining the point still further, Adomnán then refers to a little, square church beside the river which marks the place where Jesus left his clothes during his baptism. The bodily enactment of Jesus' baptism is thus established beyond question: it was a full immersion up to his neck, and he undressed before entering the water. As the evidence for bathing rituals shows consistently, these are the same two features – a requirement for full-bodied immersion and (hence) nakedness – around which Adomnán's predecessors and northern Christians more generally appear to have deviated from mainstream practice, and which Bede himself amends in retelling the anonymous Lindisfarne monk's account.

As Bede records, Adomnán much preferred 'English' church customs, and urged their adoption in Iona and among Christians in the north, including the dating of Easter and *in aliis quibusque decretis* 'in various other ordinances':

> mutatus mente es; ita ut ea quae uiderat et audierat in ecclesiis Anglorum, suae suorumque consuetudini libentissime praeferret.
>
> He altered his opinion so greatly that he readily preferred the customs which he saw and heard in the English churches to those of himself and his followers.[380]

Bede knew Adomnán personally and it is all but inconceivable that this represents an invented propaganda about his Ionan counterpart's stance on such high-profile

[379] *De Locis Sanctis*, ed. by D. Meehan (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1958), II.16, p 86-7.
[380] *HE* V.15, p 506-7.

differences. Indeed Bede's claims can be corroborated, since Adomnán himself persuaded the churches in the north of Ireland that were outside Ionan influence to switch to the Roman system of dating Easter, and continued to argue with the Ionan community right up until his death in 704 as Bede's account proceeds to record. The fact that he promotes devotional bathing as a full-body immersion conducted without clothes, stressing the baptismal prototype of Jesus with a clear focus on the performative details, indicates that this might well be a cultural practice with much at stake for church tradition. In this respect, it is notable that Adomnán gives one of the most detailed descriptions of devotional bathing with regard to Arculf, but omits Columba's practice of the same discipline, even though it formed an early and clearly documented part of his cult. As with Columba's baptismal activity, it seems once again that Adomnán has chosen silence about the saint's performance of ritual immersion.

What is obvious from an examination of the two types of bathing ritual as described by the writers is that the one with a greater emphasis on an interaction with nature is Bede, which runs counter to the common perception that Celtic-influenced culture had a greater sympathy with the natural world than other manifestations of Christianity. The likelihood that Lindisfarne's monastic culture remained close to Iona for some of its devotional practices seems high, considering the similarities of the bathing rituals as described by the Lindisfarne monk and poets celebrating Columba's immersions. Yet it is Bede's Cuthbert who fully embraces the elements, leaving his clothes and wading deep into the waters, immersed without inhibition in the environment, singing hymns of praise accompanied by the rhythm of the waves. Compared with the Ionan rite of standing silently, arms outstretched, partially dressed and in water waist deep, it seems more of a full-bodied expression of ritualised joy and praise immersed in the natural world, and much less an ascetic exercise in bodily punishment – a significant point that will be explored further.

When comparing Cuthbert's bathing at Coldingham with the shape of baptismal practices, it is interesting to note that from the perspective of a monk in an Ionan foundation (the anonymous writer of Lindisfarne), immersion symbolism is placed in an ascetic context, the emphasis on mortification, crucifixion, bodily danger and penance. With Bede, the indications are that baptism was seen as more of a cosmological celebration. Although it could be argued in objection that the bathing should for this and other reasons be interpreted outside the lexicon of baptismal ritual, as will be seen these two perspectives reflect well-documented different interpretations that were applied to the baptism liturgy itself by influential theologians of the early church. Indeed such different perspectives on baptism can even be detected in the gospel accounts, John the Baptist referring to it exclusively in penitential terms,[381] while only Jesus refers to it in terms of birth.[382]

7.8 Foot washing, sin and the cosmology of baptism

As seen above, scholars have interpreted the foot washing activity in terms of monastic service and obedience. Evidence has been presented throughout this and the previous chapter that ritual approaches to water can only be fully understood in terms of theology that had been developed around the various baptismal procedures of the early church. With this context in mind, it is possible to look rather more deeply at the significance of the foot-washing ministry.

Bede himself describes the lesson to be learned from foot washing as more than a literal lesson in hospitality, in his *Homily* on John 13:1-17 (Maundy Thursday). More importantly still, he then describes its agency in the removal of sin:

> *Si ergo*, inquit, *laui uestros pedes dominus et magister, et uos debetis alter alterius lauare pedes*. Quae uidelicet sententia et ad litteram et ad mysticum

[381] Mark 1: 4, Matthew 3: 11.
[382] John 3: 3-5, which is used to introduce a discussion about the relative status of John's and Jesus' ministry of baptism.

> sensum recte accipi et deuote debet impleri; ad litteram quidem ut per caritatem seruiamus inuicem non solum in lauando pedes fratrum sed et in quibus-libet eorum necessitatibus adiuuandis; ad mysticum uero intellectum ut sicut dominus peccata paenitentibus dimittere consueuit ita etiam nos peccantibus in nos fratribus dimittere festinemus. Sicut ille lauit nos a peccatis nostris interpellando patrem pro nobis ita et nos
>
> He [Jesus] said, '*If I, your Lord and master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet*'. We should take this statement in both its literal sense and its mystical sense, and we ought to devoutly carry it out. Its literal sense is that we should serve each other's needs in charity, not only by washing our brothers' feet, but also by aiding them in any of their needs. The mystical sense is that, just as our Lord is wont to forgive the sins of those who repent, so also should we hasten to forgive our brothers when they sin against us. Just as he washes us from our sins by interceding with the Father on our behalf, so also should we[383]

This provides a particularly interesting context in which to consider the anonymous account of Cuthbert's progression of foot washing, from an angelic visitor within the monastery complex to an outreach of healing creation that has been marred by sin, the continuum of a missionary dynamic from cloister to cosmos. Bede, as seen previously in his reworking of the anonymous material, is particularly aware of significant theological principles.

Although his metrical and prose accounts of the foot washing do not add exegetically to the potential of this incident, there is an interesting item of textual evidence that he did initially acknowledge the significance of the sea creatures' foot washing as a means of removing sin. This survives in a single manuscript containing what appears to be the first draft of Bede's metrical *vita*. Michael Lapidge's 1989 study of this solitary MS of the *VCM*, known as Besançon 186, argues that it was written around 705, the younger Bede producing a less expert version than the more literary vulgate version.[384]

With this text, therefore, we appear to have an early example of Bede's hagiography that is less varnished than the more celebrated final form, and from a theological perspective

[383] Bede: *Homily* II.5, *CCSL* 122, p 218; translation Martin & Hurst (1991 bk 2), p 48.
[384] Lapidge (1989), p 83.

perhaps less cautious too. The Besançon manuscript has not yet been published for academic study, but Lapidge describes some of the key differences with the later, authorised version. Although the description of Cuthbert's bathing is brief, there is one detail that Lapidge regards as puzzling. He seeks to explain an awkward phrase used to describe the sea creatures as they wipe Cuthbert's feet as a literary problem:

> They [the sea creatures] set to work to wipe the 'watery cold' (*aequoreum... frigus*) from the holy body. Bede's striving for abstract, generalized expression is here seen clearly through comparison with the diction of his earlier (Besançon) version. There the animals had wiped *aequoreas... sordes* from the saint's body – where the poet seems to have in mind something concrete like sea weed (*sordes* means literally 'filth') but in the revised, vulgate version any trace of concreteness has been replaced by the suggestively abstract expression 'watery cold'.[385]

Does Bede really use *sordes* to mean seaweed? This word appears just once in the *Historia ecclesiastica*. Remarkably, it is in the context of the community at Coldingham where Cuthbert's bathing took place, describing the "filthiness" of the habits of the community that led to its eventual destruction in a fire.[386] As noted frequently above, scholars have interpreted Bede's bathing as a way of encouraging discipline in this community, but this linguistic connection is either a coincidence, or it indicates that Bede himself has made a conscious or unconscious connection between the filth of this cliff-edge community's sins and the filth that Cuthbert ritually washes off in the sea immediately below. It seems Cuthbert may have tried to give the community a ritual not simply for imposing discipline by mortifying the body, as other scholars have argued, but rather for liturgically washing away their personal sins and starting again. As described above, Bede himself speculates about the cosmological reach of such baptismal washing, including foot washing, in his homily on the subject, a point that will be resumed in chapter 9. If Bede's initial use of the word *sordes* were a reflection of

[385] *Ibid*. p 92.
[386] *HE* IV.25.

this aspect of foot washing, it would be entirely consistent with his theological exegesis. Sin, not disobedience, damages the relationship between humans and the natural world.

There is further contextual evidence about the link between daily washing and the removal of sin to be found in an entirely different source of the same era, Eddius Stephanus' *vita Wilfridi*. Here the hagiographer refers to Wilfrid's own practice of nightly washing in highly charged theological terms:

> Corpus quoque ab utero matris suae integrum, sicut coram fidelibus testatus est, sine pollutione custodivit, quod in aqua benedicta et sanctificata nocturnis horis indesinenetur aestate et hime consuetudinare lavavit, usquedum papa Ionnes beatae memoriae et apostolicae sedis pro aetate sua huius laboris resolutionem habere praecepit.
>
> He kept his body, as he testified before the faithful, pure from his mother's womb, and unspotted, for he made it his custom to wash it during the night hours, winter and summer alike, with blessed and holy water, until Pope John of the Apostolic See and of blessed memory advised him to put an end to this rigour, out of consideration for his age.[387]

Wilfrid's bathing routine is one of the many examples which Gougaud categorises as mortification,[388] but underlying baptismal connotations are clear despite the brevity of the description. Even the water has undergone a ritual change for Wilfrid's immersion, *benedicta* and *sanctificata*, the precise terms used in the *Gelasian Sacramentary* to describe the prepared font.[389] Although clearly a physically demanding exercise that caused the Pope some concern for the elderly Wilfrid, indicating that it involved immersion rather than a simple rinsing, sprinkling or mere foot-washing, the imagery is clearly of the stains of sin being removed by a symbolic return to the womb. It is impossible to imagine any loincloth or cross-vigil posture playing a role in Wilfrid's nightly ritual as Eddius describes it. Wilfrid's bathing is starkly described as a rebirth,

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[387] Eddius Stephanus: *Vita sancti Wilfridi*, ch. 21, p 44-5.
[388] Gougaud (1927), p 165. Notably, Gougaud claims that Wilfrid copied this discipline from the Irish despite his aversion to them on other ritual matters, an argument which begs a question on that point alone.
[389] cf. *Gelasian Sacramentary*; xliv '*benedicto te, creatura aquae* and *sancta... creatura*' (Wilson (1894), p 85).

Stephanus taking great care to emphasise this point with an arresting and bodily allusion, eliding Wilfrid's post-immersion state with the innocence of a new-born baby.

7.9 The typology of Cuthbert's bathing

A final point can be made about the different emphases placed on the immersion rituals recorded in sources linked to Ionan monasteries and those recorded by other, more Roman writers. It has been argued in this chapter that the cross-posture exertions of Columba and the anonymous account of Cuthbert emphasise bodily sacrifice and asceticism, embodying a cultural attitude to water as a source of spiritual and physical peril. By way of contrast, writers including Bede, Adomnán and Eddius Stephanus reposition ritual bathing as a less inhibited act of full-bodied immersion, an embrace of the elements that takes place without any indication of physical reservation or cross-like asceticism.

These same nuances can be seen clearly in the different biblical sources that Anonymous and Bede cite by way of explanation for Cuthbert's bathing at Coldingham. Benedicta Ward has given a sensitive reading of just such a broader narrative at work in these different texts. The anonymous author describes the narrative in terms of mortification, comparing Cuthbert to the biblical figure of Daniel. The suggestion Ward offers is that Cuthbert has been thrown into danger by the lax moral behaviour of the nuns of Coldingham and comforted by sea creatures, just as Daniel is endangered (and subsequently ministered to) by lions.[390] Leaving aside the issue of the community's lax behaviour, Ward's perceptive comments about Daniel confronting the lions frames the natural world as a hostile place of mortification, of mortal danger, to be countered and converted by the actions of a holy man.

[390] Ward (1989), p 72.

Turning however to Bede's account, Ward continues that the function of the ideal monk is not simply to demonstrate monastic discipline but to reveal through it that correctly ordered Christian life in community in turn reveals an underlying cosmological truth about the correct ordering of creation itself:

> He [the spying monk] had not been watching a man on a beach with his pets; he had seen the face of Christ in a man so transfigured in prayer that the right order of creation was in him restored. For Bede, Cuthbert with the animals was an even more awesome sight than for the anonymous writer: he was the new Adam, once more at peace with all creation, naming the animals, who were the first servant and the first friend.[391]

Ward offers a reading that is highly sympathetic to Bede's exegesis about a 'first creation' and his theological formula about the original human dominion over nature being restored in the presence of a saint. Bede interprets this incident through the prism of the Transfiguration, Cuthbert so altered by deep prayer the creatures recognise him as a new Adam, a particularly perceptive comment by Ward in light of the baptismal nudity and cosmological harmony discernible through Bede's careful reworking.

The different methods of bathing would have felt and looked as Ward describes, this broader cosmological framework a useful corrective to some of the narrower interpretations of the event as a tropological lesson about monastic obedience. It further illuminates the differences in bathing practice that have been discerned in this study.

As the evidence about Cuthbert's immersion indicates, different ways of performing a bathing ritual have been revealed, yet they also have a distinctive feature in common, which is the remarkable precipitation of environmental change. From a sacramental perspective, it becomes clear that the ritual performance described by Bede and Anonymous had an effect on every participatory entity, a 360-degree radiation of blessing indiscriminately. Although a sacrament could be considered in terms of its spiritually positive effect on the human receiving ministry at the hands of a priest, it

[391] *Ibid*. p 72.

seems striking that the beneficiaries of these outdoor rituals were all those who had contact with the body of the minister. It was not merely the bather who gained in both spiritual and physical terms from entering the sea, but also the creatures which lived in the waves. This is surely part of a continuum with the many other blessings and exorcisms directed at water and its various creatures that are examined in chapter 6.

It would be tempting to argue that this radiation of holiness to all creation was an ecological instinct that once formed an integral part of an earlier, purer Christianity. But the research for this project indicates that there was a rather more immediate purpose in mind when these nature rituals were employed, and that was as part of a missionary strategy. The incidents and narratives studied in this research indicate an acute anxiety about the potential harm that can be caused to the human body by natural water. In actions that are repeated to the point where their ritual currency can be discerned, the saints directed a mission of exorcism, blessing and bathing towards these lakes, rivers and the sea in order to demonstrate that God was able to reach and redeem every part of His creation. Thus it is argued here that the friendly sea creatures at Coldingham and the lethal beast in the river Ness emerged from the same watery universe, counterparts in the same broad narrative that the saints were memorialising in the landscape through their set-piece interactions with the previously baneful water sources of the north. This is not to say that the narrative at Coldingham was simply written as a literary sequel to the monster in the river Ness, but rather that both of them are products of an immense cultural transition in which the conversion of the people was one and the same thing as a conversion of their environment.

An anthropocentric but truly sacramental theology that permeates the whole of creation must be beneficial to the entire cosmos. The missionary context indicates that this was aimed at reassuring the people of Britain, who lacked the sort of sophisticated philosophical, political and civic conceptions of Hellenistic religious and intellectual

traditions, that their primary hopes and fears were located in their relationship to the natural world and would be met by the new faith. One could call it cynical on the part of the missionaries, but it was also well-intentioned and brought benefits for all parties, to such an extent that it allows for the imputation of ecological sensitivity by later scholars, even though that is highly unlikely to have been the motivation. Even the beast of the river Ness was not killed in the process but merely sank back into the dark waters, to emerge infrequently ever after for the entertainment of subsequent generations. No wonder Britain lacks martyrs of the conversion era. It was an axe that Boniface wielded against the great Donar oak in Germany to impose his mission of evangelism, and an axe that was wielded against him and his Gospel book to end it. The sacrament of baptism as a means of conversion seems to have been as sympathetic to the seas and rivers as it was to people's bodies and souls.

At the conclusion of this primary research into the bathing rituals we are presented with two very physical and intimate aspects of the human body to contemplate: the washing of dirty feet and nakedness. Neither at first sight might appear to have much to do with the Christian ritual of baptism, or any other ritual of sacramental importance, but that is to see the past through a carefully constructed filter of academic and theological writing that has increasingly obscured such bodily intrusions into early Christian ritual. The construction of this filter will be examined briefly below, because it obscures much of the early evidence that there was not just a toleration but a positive role for such seemingly base human extremities as dirty feet and bare flesh.

For reasons that will become clear in the following examination, the academic approach to the history of early Christianity has been shaped in a way that downgrades, denigrates and even denies the agency of the body in the process of redemption. Earlier evidence, however, offers almost a mirror opposite of the way in which some scholars have attempted to reinterpret some of the embodied details of Christian ritual.

As has been seen in the research above, nocturnal bathing rituals are framed and shaped by more formal church liturgies and narratives. Baptism provides the largest narrative context for interpreting the missionaries' attempts to engage with the people of Britain and the landscape into which their existing spiritual concerns were woven. As will be seen further below, even the 'ascetic' form of devotional bathing which puts the emphasis on crucifixion and mortification has a place in baptismal theology at the time. Yet this highlights the fact that there are consistent differences in the bathing accounts which indicate contrasting models for both performing and interpreting the significance of this underlying baptismal ritual. At this point it is necessary to turn to the more formal ecclesiastical debates about the baptismal ritual in early medieval Britain in order to contextualise devotional bathing in the landscape.

CHAPTER 8

What was at stake: the Celtic baptismal dispute

The analysis above leads to the conclusion that there was something fundamentally different in the way Ionan culture conceived of the spiritual significance and the embodied practice of devotional bathing, further evidence of which is presented in this chapter. In addition, it has been demonstrated that bathing appears to be a ritual shaped to a large degree by the overall baptismal liturgy, including the contemporary practice of performing a foot washing as part of the sacrament and the introduction of an exorcism of the water itself. Further correspondences will also become clear as this research progresses.

Having proposed that baptismal liturgy and practice appear to shape a range of devotional interactions with natural water, and that two distinct ritual shapes can be discerned, it is necessary to leave bathing to one side and focus on the details of the underlying baptismal practice itself as understood in early medieval Britain. We do not have any text that records the ritual as it was performed during the period under study in this thesis, but we do know that there was a dispute about it. The correct performance of baptismal liturgy was a cause of disagreement between Celtic and Roman bishops at the start of the 7th century, discussed at a synod in *c.* 603. What this baptismal dispute was about, and whether it lingered beyond this synod, are two questions that need to be interrogated on their own terms, and then can be held in parallel with the differences in devotional bathing outlined above, to examine if they are connected to the barely documented differences in the underlying forms of baptismal practice and theology. It will be argued in this chapter that differences in bathing and baptismal practice were deeply engrained in the culture of Britain, particularly in tribal areas which had previously experienced limited contact with Roman civilisation.

8.1 Current interpretations of the Celtic baptismal dispute

This dispute is described explicitly by Bede just once, in the context of the synod between the British bishops and Augustine of Canterbury. Academics have long attempted to resolve the nature of the problem with Celtic baptismal practice, and in doing so have concentrated most research on the brief wording that Bede includes in his short summary:

> '...et tamen si in tribus his mihi obtemperare uultis, ut pascha suo tempore celebretis, ut ministerium baptizandi quo Deo renascimur iuxta morem sanctae Romanae et apostolicae ecclesiae conpleatis, ut genti Anglorum una nobiscum uerbum Domini praedicetis, cetera quae agitis, quamuis moribus nostris contraria, aequanimiter cuncta tollerabimus.'
>
> '...nevertheless, if you are willing to submit to me in three points, we will gladly tolerate all else that you do, even though it is contrary to our customs. The three points are: to keep Easter at the proper time; to perform the sacrament of baptism, whereby we are born again to God, according to the rites of the holy Roman and apostolic Church; and to preach the word of the Lord to the English people in fellowship with us.'[392]

Bede does not state what the problem was with Celtic baptism, offering only Augustine's brief prescription for the correct ritual. The option preferred by historians and theologians is that the difference relates not to baptism itself but to the practice of anointing the baptismal candidate with oil immediately after the ritual, and in particular the Roman insistence that a bishop should preside over this sacrament. This rests largely on Bede's use of the word *conpleatis* in his brief reference to the dispute.

A full discussion of this topic is found in the second edition of *Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church* (1987), in which Jane Stevenson adds an extensive introduction to an original work by F. E. Warren (1881).[393] In this she summarises the work of several other historians, particularly Margaret Pepperdene,[394] as concluding:

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[392] *HE* II.2, p 138-9.
[393] F. E. Warren and Jane Stevenson, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, 2nd edn (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1987).
[394] Margaret Pepperdene, 'Baptism in the Early British and Irish Churches', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 22 (1955), 110–23.

> Bede's precise form of words is 'ut ministerium baptizandi que Deo renascimur iuxta morem sanctae romanae et apostolicae ecclesiae *conpleatis*', suggesting that the problem is not one of baptism, but of confirmation, at this time normally performed at the end of the baptismal service, but by a bishop rather than a priest. The Celtic Churches could have been anomalous either in omitting the rite altogether, or in permitting it to be performed by a priest.[395]

However there are problems with the assumptions behind this interpretation, which Stevenson acknowledges. In two of the earliest texts arising from Celtic Christianity, St Patrick himself refers to anointing after baptism, while the *Life of St Samson* twice stresses the role of the bishop in baptism. The term 'Celtic Churches' is by itself problematic, introducing the notion that there was a cohesive form of alternative Christianity to be found in the islands of Britain and Ireland, something few modern scholars would accept.

Charles Thomas also concludes after limited discussion that the perceived Celtic fault was due to the absence of a bishop at the confirmation which concluded the baptismal ceremony, also citing the word *conpleatis*.[396] He further cites Hugh Williams, in *Christianity in Early Britain* (1912), who again argues that the difference was due to a lack of anointing by bishops. However Williams highlights a strong counter-argument to this case when he points out that pope Gregory the Great had tried to ban presbyters, rather than bishops, from performing the rite of confirmation in Sardinia, but was forced to withdraw the injunction in 594 after it caused disorder.[397] A custom that Pope Gregory had permitted in Sardinia, when Augustine was himself living in Rome as abbot of a monastery, seems unlikely to be the cause of a major canonical dispute in Britain less than 10 years later.

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[395] Warren & Stevenson (1987), p liii.
[396] Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1981), p 209.
[397] Hugh Williams, *Christianity in Early Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912). A translation of the Pope's letter is in Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 206.

Charles Plummer proposes three reasons for the baptismal dispute: a lack of triple immersion, an omission of anointing with chrism (confirmation), and, interestingly in the light of this research, the Celtic practice of foot washing.[398] Plummer, perhaps paving the way for the three scholars noted above, opts for the omission of confirmation, without reference to the role of bishops in that. He firmly rejects the other two options, foot washing and triple immersion, and they do not appear in later historians' discussions. The presence of foot washing in so many later north European baptismal texts indicates that it was clearly not foot washing *per se* that was the problem, but the presence of this ritual in a family of northern liturgies is unambiguous evidence that separate baptismal practices had developed from the late 4th century onwards.

More recently, Bryan Spinks has examined Bede's phrase and follows other scholars in focusing on the force of the word *conpleatis*. He summarises the other scholarship outlined above, and concludes that it is possible Augustine expected a bishop to perform chrismation and hand-laying rather, than a presbyter.[399] However the textual evidence strongly suggests that the early Christian church used the term *perfectio* to describe this concluding ritual, a point that scholars including Spinks have not noted. This is the term used by Ambrose in *De sacramentis*, and in local councils in Spain from the 4th century onwards.[400]

Bede does not explain the nature of the dispute, but it is worth looking more closely at the language he uses. The word *conpleatis* is not the only slightly unexpected term in

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[398] *Baedae Opera Historica Volume 2*, ed. by Charles Plummer (Oxford: Clarendon, 1896), p 75-6.
[399] Spinks (2006), p 125-6. Sarah Foot (1992) concurs that the issue was connected to a lack of episcopal confirmation, p 174.
[400] Ambrose: *De sacramentis* III.2; Thompson & Srawley (1919), p 100 *n*. 2 describes Ambrose's use of *perfectio* as "almost a technical term"; for the Spanish councils, see Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 153-5.

his phrase *ut ministerium baptizandi que Deo renascimur iuxta morem sanctae romanae et apostolicae ecclesiae conpleatis*. Another key word in this text appears to be *renascimur*.

Bede uses variants of the word *conpleatis* 14 times in all his writings,[401] and variants of the root word *renascor* precisely twice as often, 28 instances. Both are therefore fairly rare but by no means unique. The term *renascimur* seems to have been deliberately chosen by Bede in this context. Nearly all of Bede's other uses of this word 'reborn' are in the context of baptism, as might be expected.[402]

The connection between the immersion of baptism and rebirth in water is well attested throughout Christian literature from the gospels onwards, and might seem an unremarkable allusion to make in early medieval writing about ritual bathing of any kind. The description of the font as a womb was an image commonly employed by a wide range of patristic writers, including Cyprian, Ephrem the Syrian and Augustine of Hippo.[403]

8.2 The font: womb or tomb in patristic exegesis

Augustine of Canterbury stresses that baptism is a rebirth in the brief comment that Bede records, a detail which has perhaps been ignored by scholars because it seems such a superfluous description. Bede, Augustine, the British bishops and Bede's readers would all know that being born again is one of the basic meanings of baptism.[404] Despite this seemingly universal exposition in biblical and patristic language of baptism

[401] Or *compleatis*, as the Brepolis database renders it in 12 of these 14 instances.
[402] For example *HE* V.7, p 470-1, where Bede connects the rebirth of baptism with clothing in white afterwards.
[403] Spink (2006), *passim* including p 58 for Cyprian, p 147 for Ephrem, p 148 for Augustine.
[404] John 3:3-5 makes the point unambiguously, and is cited in baptismal ritual as early as the mid-2nd century by Justin Martyr (Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 3).

as rebirth, it is curious to discover that one leading commentator, Ambrose, does not at any point describe the font as a womb, nor does he even allude to the notion, despite the fact that his treatises are two of the longest early works on baptismal imagery. Instead for Ambrose the font is a tomb,[405] and a place of crucifixion:

> Vide ubi baptizaris, unde sit baptisma nisi de cruce Christi, de morte Christi.
>
> Consider where thou art baptized. What source can there be for baptism, save the cross of Christ, the death of Christ?[406]

As described in chapter 6, Ambrose also saw the font water a creature in which demons might lurk and are exorcised, an austere view of baptism which will be further developed in this research. Although somewhat tangential to this research, it would appear that the differences in Ambrosian imagery and Roman imagery relating to the font are deeply embedded, visceral notions about the embodiment of Christian ritual. This topic has been examined in some detail by Nancy Jay, offering contrasting visions of sacrifice based on the controlled, and male, blood letting of deliberate wounding and cutting with the uncontrolled blood letting of female reproduction.[407] Although Jay does not consider the Christian ritual of baptism in this context, it would appear that Ambrose at least is very much of the former mindset, with his striking emphasis on baptism as a form of crucifixion, accompanied by the cross. As will be seen, traces of just such a difference of emphasis can be seen in the contrasting embodiments of baptismal ritual in Ambrosian and Roman sacramentaries and liturgical commentaries.

Revisions over a number of centuries to the Ambrosian family of baptismal liturgies indicate a process of correction to this rather one-sided view of the ritual. The *Bobbio Missal*, dating from around 700, also has no reference to a womb, but the *Stowe Missal*

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[405] *De sacramentis* 3.1.1.
[406] *De sacramentis* 2.2.6 (p 17, translation p 87); cf. *De mysteriis* 4.20.
[407] Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp x, xxii, 107.

of around 800 includes a phrase about the unspotted womb of the font that is identical to the *Gelasian Sacramentary*:

> ab immaculato diuini fontes utero in nouam renouatam creaturam progenies cælestis emergat[408]
>
> there may come forth from the unspotted womb of the divine font a heavenly offspring[409]

This is perhaps a correction to 'Celtic' liturgy that reflects an end to the controversy as described by Bede, if one accepts the emphasis in *renascimur* proposed here, a correction acknowledging that the meaning and embodiment of baptism are to be understood as a ritual rebirth, after Roman theology.

Close examination of Bede's brief clause about the baptismal controversy indicates a particular emphasis on this point of rebirth, and it adds a further qualification still. Baptism is described not just as a rebirth but *ministerium baptizandi que Deo renascimur* 'the sacrament of baptism, whereby we are born again to God' (emphasis added), which seems to add a second unnecessary qualification. Why is Bede choosing to emphasise this aspect of baptism?

One possible context for this survives in a letter from Pope Zachary to St Boniface in May 748, where he refers to a synod of an unspecified place and time in Britain. According to the Pope, this meeting decreed that baptism had to refer to all three members of the Trinity, and that any other practice rendered the sacrament invalid.[410] There is no consensus among scholars as to the identity of this synod, but Augustine of Canterbury's second meeting with the British bishops in *c*. 603 is one candidate, as is the reorganisation of the church commenced by Theodore of Tarsus on his arrival as

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[408] *The Stowe Missal*, ed. by George F. Warner (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1915), p 30.
[409] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 280.
[410] *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland Vol. 3*, ed. by Arthur West Haddan and William Stubbs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), p 51-2.

archbishop of Canterbury in 668.[411] Pope Zachary's letter is slightly later evidence, arising from a distant source, and vague on the context, but it does correspond to Bede's record that an unconventional form of baptism was once employed in Britain and criticised by Roman ecclesiastics. The letter's evidence merits consideration in parallel with Augustine's emphasis on the presence of one person of the Trinity, namely God (*Deo renascimur*), clearly referring to God the Father in the context of rebirth. Do the evidence of both Bede and Pope Zachary's letter, put together, refer to an omission of God the Father during the performance of the baptismal rite as performed by some Celtic Christians? The evidence certainly allows for this possibility. On the surface, it must be said that such an omission would be obvious, and very easy to amend, which suggests that the synod's ruling alludes to an underlying deviation in the performance of baptism itself. This was clearly no accidental omission of a couple of words, which would hardly need a synod to correct.

The point must be spelled out clearly here that the sequence in the baptismal liturgy when the Trinity is (or should be) invoked is at the moment of immersion. For these reasons, it is argued here that an alteration to the baptismal liturgy which removes or substantially downgrades the act of immersion is also the only alteration to the ritual that would jeopardise the invocation of the Trinity. The words and actions are united at this point. The weight of this Trinitarian dispute can therefore focus our attention to the moment in the liturgy when the ritual action is supposed to embody it: a triple immersion accompanied by three credal questions. It is possible that there were two unrelated baptismal disputes in 7th century Britain, but the evidence for either of them is so slight and oblique it would be difficult to consider this a preferred solution. Only by drawing on the entirety of the scant evidence from as many cultural sources as

[411] *Ibid*. p 52.

possible, including related practices such as devotional bathing, can any further insight be gained into the ritual expressions of baptismal practice, and hence the underlying concepts that shaped them.

In another writing, Bede somewhat surprisingly offers a defence of baptising in the name of Christ only, on the basis that all three members of the Trinity are designated by the naming of one of them. The authority he cites on this matter of baptism is none other than Ambrose himself, whose influence on early British baptismal practice forms a substantial part of this investigation:

> Cum ecclesiae regula sit fideles in nomine sanctae trinitatis baptizari, quaeritur quomodo Lucas per totum libelli huius textum non aliter quam in nomine Iesu Christi baptismum dari testetur; quod ita beatus Ambrosius solvit quia 'per unitatem nominis implementum mysterium sit. Qui sive Christum dicas et deum patrem a quo unctus est filius, et ipsum qui unctus est filium et spiritum quo unctus est designasti; scriptum est enim, *Iesum a Nazareth quomodo unxit eum deus spiritu sancto*. Sive patrem dicas, et filium eius et spiritum oris pariter indicasti[412]

> Since the rule of the church is that the faithful are baptized in the name of the holy Trinity, a question arises as to how it is that in the whole text of this book Luke bears witness to the giving of baptism only in the name of Jesus Christ. The blessed Ambrose resolves this question as follows: *Through the unity of the name the mystery is completed. If you say 'Christ,' you have designated at the same time God the Father, by whom the Son was anointed, and the Son who was himself anointed, and the Spirit with whom he was anointed, for it is written, 'Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit.' If you say, 'the Father,' you also indicate at the same time his Son and the Spirit of his mouth*[413]

Perhaps Bede had reason to be sympathetic to alternative British baptismal practices, which would certainly help to explain his oft-noted avoidance of any detailed criticism of this topic, in stark contrast to his frequent invective about the Easter computus dispute. If entire generations of baptism were to have doubts cast over its validity, the

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[412] Bede: *Expositio actuum apostolorum* X, 48 in *Bedae Venerabilis: Expositio Actuum Apostolorum et Retractatio*, ed. M. L. W. Laistner (Cambridge, MA: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1939), p 51. The citation is a series of extracts from Ambrose: *De spiritu sancto* 1.3.43-5 (*CSEL* 79, p 32-33).

[413] *Bede: Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. by Lawrence T. Martin (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1989), p 103-4.

problems arising would be many and long lasting. Given the way he relegates this dispute, it seems likely that he simply felt that the Celtic practice had been eccentric but just about sacramentally defensible. This would also help to explain why he acknowledges Columba's baptism of the Picts, while Adomnán seems reluctant to mention it, perhaps more acutely aware of the legacy of his Ionan predecessors' baptismal idiosyncrasies. As described, Adomnán was personally convinced by the arguments of the English church about matters of church custom, according to Bede. His awkward silence on Columba's baptismal mission becomes more easily understandable if there had been doubts cast over its validity, and it is indeed difficult to think of any other reason why he might have chosen to avoid promoting it.

The limited evidence available does not permit any definitive conclusions to be drawn on the topic of baptismal dispute, but an advance can be made by bringing together all available evidence about baptismal theology, practice and culture, including devotional bathing.

8.3 The Celtic baptismal dispute: 'incomplete' baptism

However, all of this is out of step with current scholarly conclusions about the nature of the dispute. The word *conpleatis* is the one that other studies into this baptismal deviation have most heavily relied upon, and it needs to be considered particularly carefully. Is there any evidence that it is used by any writers of this period to describe confirmation? None is cited by scholars.

Does *conpleatis* refer to something else instead? While it might seem logical in modern English to claim that 'complete' baptism might refer to a full-bodied immersion, such a claim requires evidence from Bede's time. Extensive searching through related texts of the period has thrown up one possible match for this, written during the years in which Bede himself was active, once again in the *Gelasian Sacramentary*. As noted in chapter

7, scholars have found correspondence between Bede's other liturgical writings and the formulae preserved in this text. If Bede did not know the precise text, he was at least familiar with its patterns of worship.

As far as can be ascertained, it is this document which gives the only other uses of the verb 'complete' in a baptismal context in this period, in an exegetical passage that talks of the transformational effect on the body (stress added in bold underline):

> Vos itaque, dilectissimi, ex vetere homine in novum reformamini; et de carnalibus spiritales, de terrenis incipitis esse caelestes: secura et constanti fide credite resurrectionem, quae facta est in Christo, etiam in nobis omnibus esse **complendam**, et hoc secuturum in toto corpore quod praecessit in capite. Quoniam et ipsum, quod percepturi estis, baptismi sacramentum huius spei exprimit formam. Quaedam enim ibi mors, et quaedam resurrectio celebratur. Vetus homo deponitur et novus sumitur.[414]
>
> And so, dearly beloved, we transform you from the *old man into the new* [cf Eph. 4.22]: from *carnal* you begin to be *spiritual*, from *earthly* to *heavenly* [cf. 1 Cor. 15.44ff]: with quiet and steadfast faith you must believe that the resurrection, which in Christ became a fact, must be **completed** in us all, that what started in *the Head shall follow in the whole body* [cf. Col. 1.18]. Moreover, the very sacrament of baptism which you are to receive expresses the form of this hope. For in it is celebrated a kind of death and resurrection. *The old man is put off and the new man put on* [cf. Eph. 4.22, 24].[415]

In this text, the term 'complete' is indeed used in conjunction with a reference to a baptism *toto corpore*, the whole body. It is true that the reference to the body is also an allegorical reference to the church as the body of Christ, so it might be objected that this is not a specifically physical match with the notion of a full-body immersion. But a truly precise match, using mundane language without spiritual or allegorical meanings, would be hard to locate in any baptismal phrase outside the rubric, and the language overall repeatedly refers to change that was intended to work on the entire body. Regarding one of the other words in Bede's brief account of correct baptismal

[414] *Gelasian Sacramentary*, section 35 in Wilson (1894), p 55-6.
[415] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 222-3; the parantheses are all in this translation.

procedure, the term *renascimur* also appears in the Gelasian Sacramentary, immediately before the candidate descends into the font:

> omnis homo hoc sacramentum regenerationis ingressus in vera innocentia, nova infantia, renascatur.[416]
>
> every one who enters this sacrament of regeneration may be reborn in a new infancy of true innocence.[417]

The practice of a full-bodied soaking would also require the candidate to strip. References to the undressing required for this are particularly rare in the rubric of early liturgical documents regarding baptism, but the Gelasian Sacramentary contains one:

> Quum autem expoliatur infirmus, benedicit fontem.[418]
>
> When the sick man is undressed, he [the priest] blesses the font.[419]

The nakedness of the candidate can be considered a prerequisite for a full-bodied washing, whether enacted through immersion or being drenched from head to foot, a signifier that the baptizand was prepared to get wet all over. The requirement for one is a reliable guide to the requirement for the other, which offers two angles from which to interrogate the bodily details of any form of bathing.

It is not possible to compile all the evidence here that baptism in Late Antiquity and early medieval Europe required the baptizand to be naked, because it is so extensive, but one citation from John the Deacon can serve as evidence that this was considered a universal custom. The text is in the form of a late 5th or early 6th century letter by John, at the time a deacon based in Rome, to a knowledgeable aristocrat called Senarius, who was curious as to the meaning of the different elements of the ritual. This gives us a glimpse of the customary practice, in Rome at least, which Bede for one would

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[416] *Gelasian Sacramenary*, section 44, in Wilson (1894), p 86.
[417] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 234.
[418] *Gelasian Sacramentary* 73.117, in Wilson (1894), p 115.
[419] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 241.

naturally prefer. The nakedness is justified theologically in ways reminiscent of early patristic exposition, as will be seen:

> Hi etiam nudis pedibus iubentur incedere, et depositis morticinis et carnalibus indumentis agnoscant se illius uiae iter arripere, in qua nihil asperum, nihil potest inueniri nociuum. Haec igitur aecclesiastica sollicitudo per successiones temporum cauta dispositione constituit, quamuis horum uestigia uetus pagina non ostendat.[420]

> They [the baptizands] are commanded to go in naked even down to their feet, so that having put aside the carnal garments of mortality they may acknowledge that they make their journey upon a road upon which nothing harsh and nothing harmful can be found. The Church has ordained these things with watchful care over many years, although the old books may not show traces of them.[421]

As the last sentence states explicitly, the requirement for nudity was clearly treated with a degree of discretion in ecclesiastical documents, an illuminating comment that entirely accords with Bede's restraint on the topic, as described.

In conclusion, nakedness can be read as the bodily precondition for a full-bodied, 'complete' immersion, a practical requirement for the rigorous performance of the ritual. From a purely mundane perspective, in other words ignoring any theological exposition about the meaning of nudity, nakedness and full immersion could be seen as co-dependent in a ritual performance. In other words, there would be no need to ask a baptismal candidate to undress completely and then offer them a token form of sprinkling confined to one part of the body. This provides another perspective from which to understand the conjunction of waist-deep and partially clothed bathing that has been discerned in Ionan practice. It will be argued below that the Roman performance of baptismal ritual required naked immersion in water that covered the body, a physical expression of the theology of rebirth. It is this that appears to be deficient in Celtic baptism and devotional bathing alike.

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[420] *Epistola Johannis Diaconi ad Senarium* §6, in *Analecta Reginensia*, ed. by Dom A. Wilmart, Studi E Testi Vol 59 (Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1933), p 170-9, at p 174.
[421] John the Deacon: *Letter to Senarius*, §6, in Whitaker & Johnson (2003) p 210.

8.4 Nakedness: contested baptismal practice

The revisionist tendency to look back through history with an armful of clothes and drape any figures in Christian tradition who happen to be naked, even for the most mundane and innocuous of reasons, has been noted in passing by other academics. Ruth Barcan (2004) highlights the tendency of scholars since the 18th century to translate the Greek *gymnos* and the Latin *nudus* in biblical and even classical contexts as 'scantily clad', pointing out that

> such translations appear to be compromised, the result more of prudery and assumption than accurate scholarship, for these words do in fact appear to have meant completely naked.[422]

Barcan continues that this revisionist process of saving modern prudery from "serious shock" began with the Dutch scholar Gisbert Cuypert (or Cuper) (d. 1716) and has not been methodically challenged since.[423] Perhaps the impulse seems relatively unimportant to most historians and theologians, but it has the effect of obscuring the view of the physicality of Christian ritual at the time of the early church, in contexts such as asceticism, devotional bathing, and particularly baptism. Such an unaccountable erasure of the body from the scene of Christianity's prominent ritual of immersion and induction also draws much needed attention to the role that bodily shame plays in the construction of the historical record. Although seeming at first sight something of a tangent to the topic of this research project, it will be seen that devotional bathing was itself knotted up in just such a tangle of discarded clothing in the records of the early British church.

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[422] Ruth. Barcan, *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p 20. For the argument that the words *gymnos* and *nudus* did actually mean what they say, she cites Sturtevant, E. H. '*Gymnos* and *nudus*', *American Journal of Philology* 33 (1912), p 324-9 and for classical examples Mann, J. C. '*Gymnazo* in Thucydides i.6 5-6' *Classical Review* 24 (1974), p 177-8.

[423] *Ibid*. p 21.

Anxiety about the natural world and rituals conducted intensively within it are also anxieties about the human body, more acutely felt than mere abstract concepts of gods and demons lurking in water, caves, groves, islands, wilderness and many other types of landscape. To understand these embodied forms of belief – of ritual – one needs to consider the human body at its most vulnerable, fighting a storm from a boat at sea, standing in waves, wrestling with snakes in caves, swimming with killer beasts. The extent to which early Christians insulated themselves or exposed themselves to these dangers can not be viewed through Enlightenment and later attitudes about decency, respectability, modesty, or differences between the sexes and dress codes that many now consider appropriate for dignifying the Christian record. The body once meant something different to what it has become, a shift that is changed by and also changes the human relationship to the natural world.

This desire to erase the body from Christian ritual has driven a process of historical revisionism that continues to shape scholarship today, reaching perhaps its academic apotheosis with a tendentious journal article in 2003 by the conservative Baptist theologian Laurie Guy. In this, Guy claims that the early church did not routinely conduct baptism with naked candidates, despite what he refers to as "rhetoric" that suggests otherwise.[424] He cites John Chrysostom's *Instructions for Catechumens* as his principal evidence for clothed bathing, a text which describes the baptismal candidates entering the exorcism stage of the ceremony "with but one garment on".[425] Guy promotes this as "the best pointer to the situation that most commonly prevailed", claiming without further citation that "they retained this covering for their final

[424] Laurie Guy, '"Naked" Baptism in the Early Church: The Rhetoric and the Reality', *Journal of Religious History*, 27 (2003), pp 133–42.
[425] *Ibid*. p 140, citing Chrysostom: *Instructions to Catechumens* 1.2 (*NPNF* Ser. 1, Vol. 9).

exorcism and likely also for the immediately succeeding baptism."[426] It is certainly true that Chrysostom considers this single robe to be the conventional clothing for exorcism, since it is a dress code that he repeats in his own closely related text *Baptismal Instructions*. In many ways this ought to be the primary text to examine for insight into the ritual as Chrysostom practised it, because it describes the full baptismal process in much greater detail.[427] On that basis, one merely needs to read further through this manual to find an unambiguous description of what happens to this single garment after the exorcism has finished:

> After stripping you of your robe, the priest himself leads you down into the flowing waters.[428]

The fact that the baptizand was naked can thus be proved using Chrysostom's own description about clothing, which Guy himself accepts as literal and authoritative when it comes to the dress code for exorcism. In case there were any lingering doubt, Chrysostom also develops an eloquent mystagogy about this nakedness that leaves no reasonable possibility for ambiguity, exhorting the candidates not to feel shame because Adam and Eve had been naked and unashamed before they sinned.[429] The naked body was a subject in the baptismal liturgy, not an object as Guy would have it.[430]

In conclusion, then, it seems clear that the conventional baptismal ritual required the baptismal candidate to undress in order that he or she might be soaked in water all over. Whether standing in a container and having it poured all over them or actually being submerged entirely beneath the surface, the ritual was clearly intended to involve the

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[426] Guy (2003) p 140. This argument is introduced as a possibility by the usually meticulous Ferguson (2009), p 537 n. 15.
[427] Chrysostom: *Baptismal Instructions* §11, in *St John Chrysostom, Baptismal Instructions*, ed. by Paul W. Harkins (New York: Paulist Press, 1963), p 135.
[428] Chrysostom: *Baptismal Instructions* §28, p 170.
[429] *ibid*, p 170, 239.
[430] See in particular Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p 24-36 on the cultural and theological contexts for naked baptism.

whole body. This nudity would not be required if baptism were merely a token washing of the lower half of the body, or just the feet, and is by itself a marker of the intention to embrace the font completely.

From every angle investigated in this research, the evidence about British baptism and bathing rituals indicates that the custom in Celtic culture was to leave this bodily immersion decidedly incomplete.

8.5 Baptismal dispute in the later 7th century

But did the dispute about baptismal practice continue to reverberate through Britain for so long and across such distances that traces can be found in Northumbrian hagiographies in the late 7th century? The first reference to the dispute has been cited above, one of the main disagreements between Augustine of Canterbury and the British bishops in 603. The identity of these bishops is not clear, but they are most closely associated with the Celtic monastery at Bangor-on-Dee. The meeting proved unsuccessful, so much so that Bede claimed the community of monks suffered divine retribution some years later at the battle of Chester, when 1,200 of this *gentis perfidae* ('nation of heretics') were slain.[431] The location of this unsuccessful meeting has not been identified beyond the reference to this community, which is near modern-day Wrexham. Charles Plummer believes British faction might have included representatives from northern Britain:

> Representatives of the Strathclyde Britons might be included under the term 'Brettonum episcopi.' They were not at this time cut off from the North Welsh. That was the result of the battle of Chester and the events which followed it[432]

This argument about baptism therefore appears to have taken place long before the set-piece confrontation of northern Celtic and Roman clerics at the Synod of Whitby, and in

[431] *HE* II.2, p 140-1.
[432] Plummer (1896), p 75-6.

a mostly southern context. At Whitby, so the historical consensus has it, the argument was about the date of Easter and the correct form of tonsure according to both Bede[433] and Wilfrid's hagiographer Eddius Stephanus.[434] However, looking at Bede's introduction to this later synod carefully, it seems that there was another problem that might have precipitated the meeting. As in the dispute involving Augustine of Canterbury some 61 years earlier, a careful reading of Bede suggests that a problem with the baptismal ritual was still causing concern:

> grauior de obseruatione paschae necnon et de aliis ecclesiasticae uitae disciplinis controuersia nata est. Vnde merito mouit haec questio sensus et corda multorum, timentium ne forte accepto Christianitatis uocabulo in uacuum currerent aut cucurrissent. Peruenit et ad ipsas principum aures, Osuiu uidelicet regis et filii eius Alchfridi, quia nimirum Osuiu a Scottis edoctus ac baptizatus, illorum etiam lingua optime inbutus, nil melius quam quod illi docuissent autumabat[435]

Translation of the passage is complicated by Bede's use of the imprecise phrase *ne forte*. Colgrave & Mynors renders it as follows:

> a still more serious controversy arose concerning the observance of Easter as well as about other matters of ecclesiastical discipline. This dispute naturally troubled the minds and hearts of many people who feared that, though they had received the name of Christian, they were running or had run in vain. All this came to the ears of the rulers themselves, Oswiu and his son Alhfrith. Oswiu, who had been educated and baptized by the Irish and was well versed in their language, considered that nothing was better than what they had taught.[436]

This translation renders *ne forte* as 'though', but this translation is questionable. These same two words appear together again at the end of the chapter, and are translated there by Colgrave & Mynors as 'otherwise'. The sentence could instead be taken to mean that the people were afraid that their receipt of the name Christian – their baptism, in other words – had been nominal only, rendering their subsequent life as a Christian invalid.[437]

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[433] *HE* III.25.
[434] *Vita sancti Wilfridi*, ch. 10.
[435] *HE* III.25, p 296.
[436] *HE* III.25, p 297; *n*. 3 points out that *currerent aut cucurrissent* is a citation from Galatians 2: 2.
[437] *HE* III.25 p 306-7 *ne forte me adueniente ad fores regni caelorum* "otherwise when I come to the gates of the kingdom of heaven". The phrase *ne forte* appears five times in

The more recent, revised version of Sherley-Price's translation offers this alternative reading:

> an even more serious controversy arose about Easter and also about other rules of Church discipline. This dispute rightly began to trouble the minds and consciences of many people, who feared that they might have received the name of Christians in vain. Eventually the matter came to the notice of King Oswy and his son Alchfrid. Oswy thought nothing could be better than the Irish teaching, having been instructed and baptized by the Irish and having a complete grasp of their language.[438]

If Bede's circumlocution about *accepto Christianitatis uocabulo* ('received the name of Christian') is a reference to the ritual way of entering the church, Whitby was precipitated to some extent by an argument about baptism. Certainly the passage only makes complete sense if there is something so fundamental at stake: any Christian could simply switch from the Celtic to the Roman calculation of Easter if their baptism were considered entirely valid, and continue accordingly. Furthermore, the issue of a distinctive baptismal rite practised by a church of Celtic origin is raised by the reference to king Oswiu, who had been 'instructed and baptized by the Irish' and prefers what he has experienced. Important though the date of Easter is, and irritating as it might have been to live in a household where one was celebrating Easter while the other was mid-way through Lent, this is surely of less significance than the fear that baptism itself was invalid. The consensus of historians is that Whitby was mostly about the date of Easter with a minor dispute regarding the tonsure, but even reading Bede entirely at face value it is clear that he acknowledges the inclusion of other issues:

> Mota ergo ibi quaestione de pascha uel tonsura uel aliis rebus ecclesiasticus
>
> When this question of Easter and of the tonsure and other ecclesiastical matters was raised[439]

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total in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, and only in this instance does Colgrave & Mynors translate it as 'though'.

[438] *Bede: A History of the English Church and People*, ed. by David Farmer, trans. by Leo Sherley-Price, Revised translation by Latham, R. E. (London: Penguin, 1990), p 187.

[439] *HE* III.25, p 298-9.

The evidence therefore suggests that there was still a persistent problem with the way in which baptism was performed by at least one Christian community of Celtic origin, most likely in the north of Britain where Oswiu spent his time in exile. There is one reference to this period of exile earlier in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, where Bede refers to Oswiu and other young Northumbrian nobles shortly before 633:

> apud Scottos siue Pictos exulabant, ibique ad doctrinam Scottorum cathecizati et baptismatis sunt gratia recreati.
>
> living in exile among the Irish or the Picts where they were instructed in the faith as the Irish taught it and were regenerated by the grace of baptism.[440]

It is therefore clear that there was a continuing difference in baptismal instruction in the decades before the Synod of Whitby in northern Britain, and it is particularly interesting that Bede suggests this applies to both the Irish, almost certainly meaning Iona,[441] and Pictland. The notion of a northern British deviation in baptismal practice, in precisely the regions where Columba was most active, gains a considerable degree of historical corroboration from this close reading of Bede's *Historia*.

Perhaps more interesting still is the verb that Bede uses to describe this northern baptism: *recreati*. In other instances in his *Historia* he uses *renatus* and cognates to describe baptism, precisely the same term that Augustine stresses as the catholic form of the ritual.[442] When it comes to Scottish/Pictish baptismal practice, Bede does not refer to it as a rebirth, instead employing a verb which he only uses one other time in his *Historia*, in an entirely non-baptismal context.[443] It is not possible to know for certain that the difference in practice described shortly before 633 related to the same non-canonical element or elements that had been criticised by Augustine in 603 for lacking

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[440] *HE* III.1, p 212-3.
[441] Bede repeatedly uses the words *Scottia* and *Scottus* to refer to what is clearly Iona, in *HE* III.3, III.24 and III.26.
[442] *HE* II.10 p 170-1, II.11 p 174-5, V.7 p470-1; he also uses other verbs, but *recreatus* for baptism appears only in this one instance.
[443] *HE* III.17, p 266-7 he refers to Aidan as *pauperes recreandi* 'relieving... the poor'.

any sense of a 'rebirth', but this evidence supports the argument that the same issue was at stake. The transformational performance of the baptismal ritual once again appears to be in question.

The notion that being reborn, *renascitur*, was a point of continuing dispute in the early British church is further advanced by the evidence from one of the leading opponents of Celtic practice in the 7th century, St Wilfrid, whose nightly bathing as a form of rebirth was described in chapter 7. His *vita* by Eddius Stephanus broadly agrees with Bede's account of the set-piece dispute between Celtic and Roman bishops as the Synod of Whitby in 664 and also makes no explicit reference to baptism.[444] Separately, however, Stephanus also refers to Wilfrid's own practice of devotional bathing in terms that would appear on close examination to reflect the Roman form of baptismal liturgy contained in the *Gelasian Sacramentary*, and also to reflect Augustine of Canterbury's insistence that baptism should be seen as a rebirth. As cited previously, Stephanus writes:

> Corpus quoque ab utero matris suae integrum, sicut coram fidelibus testatus est, sine pollutione custodivit, quod in aqua benedicta et sanctificata nocturnis horis indesinenetur aestate et hime consuetudinare lavavit
>
> He kept his body, as he testified before the faithful, pure from his mother's womb, and unspotted, for he made it his custom to wash it during the night hours, winter and summer alike, with blessed and holy water[445]

This imagery is remarkably close to that employed by the *Gelasian Sacramentary* to describe the effect of washing in the font:

> ab immaculato divini fontis utero in novam renata creaturam progenies caelestis emergat[446]
>
> there may come forth from the unspotted womb of the divine font a heavenly offspring[447]

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[444] Eddius Stephanus: *Vita sancti Wilfridi* ch. 10, p 23.
[445] *Ibid*. ch. 21, p 44-5.
[446] *Gelasian Sacramentary* xliv, in Wilson (1894), p 85.
[447] Whitaker & Johnson (2003), p 233-4.

Wilfrid's bathing is very deliberately described as a physical enactment of a rebirth to the extent of invoking his own birth mother. Stephanus has taken great care to stress this point, seeking to place the baptismal connotations of Wilfrid's bathing ritual in an impeccably Roman framework.

It is clear that the church of the 7th century was marred by continuing disagreement, since Augustine's synodal attempts at mediation had ended in abject failure. It is argued that the same three issues occurred in connection with both synods: the date of Easter, the tonsure, and baptism. The fourth point of contention in 603, an accusation that the British church had refused to evangelise the Anglo-Saxons, could no longer be levelled at Iona in 664, following the establishment of the Ionan mission to Northumbria at Lindisfarne in 634.

In summary, the evidence suggests that a different Celtic baptismal and catechetical practice had persisted in northern Britain between the synods of 603 and 664. Whatever it was about this Celtic understanding and practice of baptism that differed from Roman practice, it must have been firmly rooted in the culture to prove so remarkably resistant to mainstream patristic argument.

Bede goes into considerable detail about the calendrical debate but gives no insight into the argument about the 'other ecclesiastical matters' at Whitby. Benedicta Ward's comprehensive study of the main arguments rehearsed at Whitby draws on numerous strands that fed into the debate, including dynastic power struggles, individual temperament and a bewildering legacy of computus methodologies – but does not mention baptism.[448]

[448] Benedicta Ward, *A True Easter: The Synod of Whitby 664 AD* (Fairacres: SLG Press, 2008).

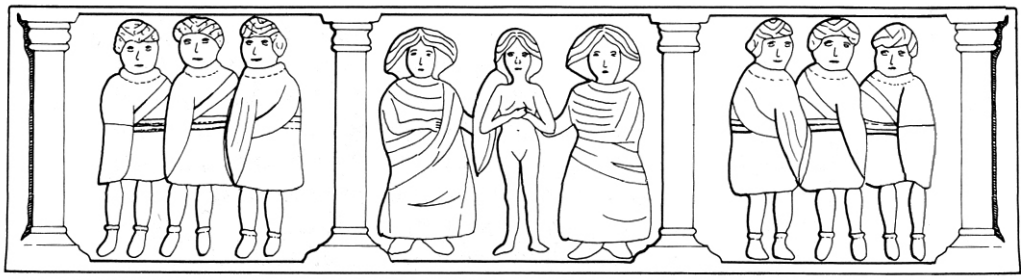
But what was the problem with baptism, and why might it have lasted so long? The research in this thesis tends towards the conclusion that there was something peculiar about the Celtic attitude towards immersion, the emphasis shifting away from a full-bodied entry into water as a ritual act, and on to a lesser washing of the lower half of the body as an alternative performance. Certainly these are the points on which Bede 'corrects' the anonymous monk of Lindisfarne's account of Cuthbert's bathing, and on which he prevaricates when describing the ascetic bathing of Dryhthelm. The evidence that devotional bathing and baptism were part of a continuum is the interpretative key that unlocks the subject of embodied, water-based ritual in early medieval Britain.

These differences in baptismal emphasis did not emerge in a vacuum. As scholars in the emerging field of liturgical studies have begun to demonstrate in an increasingly wide field of contexts, liturgy was (and remains) a shifting, dynamic and responsive expression of worship that reflects wider intellectual and cultural influences, as described in chapter 2. A possible explanation for why the culture in northern Britain might have held negative attitudes towards immersion is set out in the following section.

8.6 Bathing inhibitions and the inculturation of Christianity

In a region of Britain where large bodies of water appear to have held particular fear among pre-Christian peoples, the ritual of foot washing could have provided a culturally acceptable solution to the ritual requirement for bathing away sins. It may well be that British attitudes towards the body and bathing were long-held and deeply engrained, lingering in the north of the island in regions outside the direct influence of such enthusiastic bathing cultures as the Romans and perhaps Anglo-Saxons. One curious archaeological survival from the Roman and sub-Roman period in Britain merits brief consideration in regard to this suggestion of a cultural aversion to full-bodied

immersion. The discovery of 28 circular lead tanks across Britain, with a preponderance in East Anglia and the East Midlands, has generated ongoing speculation and controversy as to their likely ritual function. Some have Christian symbols on them, and just one has a striking figurative scene, reproduced below, along with a chi-rho Christian symbol.



Walesby lead tank: reconstruction of the likely scene by Charles Thomas[449]

Charles Thomas raises the topic of ritual foot washing in order to interpret the function, of three tanks found near a church site at Icklingham, Suffolk, but then dismisses it:

> Are they for the obscure rite of *pedliavium*, and is it really credible that this was a feature of worship in fourth-century Icklingham?[450]

The notion that there was something 'obscure' about the *pedilavium* in late 4th century European Christianity can certainly be challenged with reference to Ambrose's writings on the topic. One scholar from the British Museum has examined the evidence and suggested, partly on the basis that the Walesby tank depicts a nude woman, that it is unlikely to be Christian and perhaps depicts the goddess Venus instead, despite the presence of the chi-rho symbol on the tank.[451] Such an interpretative instinct is familiar enough in light of research presented above into a reluctance to accept the place of

[449] Thomas (1981), cover illustration and p 222, reproduced by kind permission of Jessica Mann, wife of the late Professor Thomas.
[450] Ibid. p 226.
[451] Belinda Crerar, 'Contextualising Romano-British Lead Tanks: A Study in Design, Destruction and Deposition', *Britannia*, 43 (2012), 135–66, at p 148-9: "Where is female nudity in Romano-British art typically found? the classical poise of the Walesby nude... is best paralleled by statuettes of Venus".

nudity in Christian ritual, but it is notable that no scholar has attempted to deny that other similar artefacts found in Britain with depictions of naked men are also by definition pagan.[452] The Walesby tank is indeed unique, the only one of the 26 lead tanks with a figurative frieze on it, so a lack of parallels to any other Christian art is to be expected. Despite the date of the fonts in the 4th century and the near certain presence of Christian symbolism, it is perhaps inevitable that modern scholars will argue that female nudes can not depict Christians. If nothing else, the scene provides an interesting contrast to Pliny's description of a British pagan ritual in the 1st century, where the "wives and daughters-in-law" of a tribe would march naked in public, which Hutton identifies as being the only surviving Roman record of ritual activity conducted by British pagans.[453]

Another scholar has picked up precisely these threads of evidence to conclude that the lead tanks were most probably designed for Christian ritual, possibly for a limited form of affusion in which the candidate would stand in the vessel and have water poured over her or his head.[454] Alternatively, Dorothy Watts turns to Ambrose's treatise *De sacramentis* to find the same evidence presented in this thesis that the *pedilavium* was a significant feature of 4th century baptism. Watts is one of the few scholars to connect the Ambrosian materials that have greatly shaped this study to early British Christianity. However it seems unlikely a candidate would have to undress completely for a simple foot washing, assuming the frieze on the Walesby tank depicts its own function.

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[452] David Petts, *Christianity in Roman Britain* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003) p 124-6 reproduces two such objects, including a copper alloy sheet found at Uley, Gloucestershire, which depicts at least two naked men in scenes that are clearly biblical: Jesus curing the blind man and Jonah sleeping. The sheet is on display at the British Museum: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1493396&partId=1

[453] Hutton (2013), p 254; Pliny's observation is in *Historia Naturalis* XXII.2.

[454] Dorothy Watts, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain.* (London: Routledge, 1991, republished 2015), p 158-173.

Perhaps these metal tanks, which are unique to Britain, indicate that even in the Roman period there was a desire to provide facilities that minimised contact between the body and the water in Christian rite. The Walesby tank is the deepest surviving vessel, at 55cm, while the shallowest is just 17cm high.[455] Such evidence is inconclusive, however, and some of the tanks have been found at sites with deeper immersion pools.[456] It is difficult to know whether these tanks and facilities were simply a creative and decorative innovation or whether they were ritually significant, and if so whether they reflect native British ritual preferences or were an innovation by mainly Roman communities. Certainly bathing itself presented no cultural problems to Romans. In summary, these tanks might reflect an unusually pronounced use of *pedilavium* in British Christianity, but the available evidence is open to any number of other interpretations.

Regardless of the curious existence of these tanks further to the south, the overall evidence about waist-deep bathing, a poisonous well and numerous deadly sea creatures in the early hagiographies of northern Britain indicate a culture in which natural water was replete with negative spiritual connotations.

This section concludes with a proposal to explain why northern British culture might have had particular reservations about entering natural bodies of water. It must be said that any commentary on pre-Christian beliefs can only be tentative, and the scheme suggested below is no doubt one of many theories that could be constructed about the negative associations connected to water. It can however be said with confidence that the problem with fully immersive bathing and hence baptism had nothing to do with nakedness *per se* in the northern and western parts of Britain. There is clear textual evidence arising over many centuries that the Picts and the Scots were relatively

[455] *Ibid*. p 170-1.
[456] *Ibid*. p 170.

uninhibited about nudity. Augustine of Hippo's last major text, the *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum*, includes an interesting anthropological observation that Julian, a Pelagian with whom Augustine is disputing, makes about the 'Scots' and their neighbours. The argument itself is a somewhat tedious dialogue about the supposed universality of bodily shame, against which Julian cites the following points:

> Athletis nuditas etiam decora est. Jam vero non solum adolescentulis, et petulanti sibi societate conjunctis, sed etiam totis quibusdam gentibus uterque sexus retectus, et sine secreti est electione commixtio. Quid tamen mirum, si id Scotus vicinarumque gentium barbaries agat
>
> From this you turn your eyes to procedures of doctors; in the pursuit of health they bring their art into parts over which we feel shame. The nakedness of athletes is even beautiful. In fact, among certain peoples, not merely the young folk and those joined in sexual liaisons, but all people of both sexes are unclothed, and they have intercourse without looking for privacy. Why is it surprising that the Scots and the barbarity of their neighboring peoples do this[457]

Numerous other historical references to the Pictish custom of fighting naked have been compiled by Paul Wagner.[458] Among evidence from material culture and other classical writers, there is a reference in Gildas to the lack of inhibition among the Picts and the Scots, whom he described as

> furciferosque magis vultus pilis quam corporum pudenda pudendisque proxima vestibus tegentes
>
> readier to cover their villainous faces with hair than their private parts and neighbouring regions with clothes.[459]

Wagner also presents evidence that the Picts themselves frequently depicted their warriors as naked on a number of monumental carved stones, indicating that this was not simply propaganda by critical imperial and later Christian writers.[460]

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[457] Augustine: *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum* 4.44.2, *PL* 45, cols. 1363-4; translation in *The Works of Saint Augustine I.25 Answer to the Pelagians III*, ed. by Roland J. Teske (New York: New City Press, 1998), p 424

[458] Paul Wagner, *Pictish Warrior AD 297-841* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), p 28-9.

[459] *De excidio* ch. 19.1, p 23 (translation), p 95 (Latin).

[460] Wagner (2002), p 12, 59.

A lack of clothing does not indicate a lack of rules on the matter of the body, however, and it is here that Pictish conceptions about the skin in particular offer an opportunity to interpret the evidence along lines that do justice to both spiritual and cultural considerations. The name 'Pictish' means painted, from the Latin *pictus*, referring to a colouring of the skin. It seems almost certain that this cultural practice of ornamentation was not only confined to the northern Picts, since Julius Caesar describes how every inhabitant of the island would dye their skin with woad:

> Omnes vero se Britanni vitro inficiunt, quod caeruleum efficit colorem, atque hoc horridiores sunt in pugna aspectu
>
> All the Britons, though, dye their skins with woad which produces a blue colour and thereby look all the more terrifying in battle.[461]

Caesar's comments on Britain are known to be in part propaganda,[462] but regarding skin decoration the evidence is widespread. In the first century Pliny's reference to British women marching naked, mentioned above, adds that their bodies were dyed almost black with woad. The historical references continue to mount up all the way through the period of Roman occupation and into the early medieval period. In the 3rd century Herodian elaborates on the practice of body decoration with regard to the Caledonians, a tribal group to the south of the Picts whom the Romans frequently depicted as naked on carved slabs:[463]

> They are ignorant of the use of clothes... they tattoo their bodies not only with likenesses of animals of all kinds, but with all sorts of drawings. And this is the reason why they do not wear clothes, to avoid hiding the drawings on their bodies.[464]

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[461] Caesar: *De Bello Gallico* book 5, ch. 14 in *De Bello Gallico. English and Latin*, ed. by H. J. Edwards (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1917), p 252-3.
[462] *Post-Empire Imaginaries? Anglophone Literature, History, and the Demise of Empires*, ed. by Barbara Buchenau, Virginia Richter, and Marijke Denger (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), p 201.
[463] Wagner (2002), p 28.
[464] Herodian: *Historiarum*, Book 3, 14.7.

The later evidence about body ornamentation suggests that it eventually progressed into being described as a form of tattoo, having initially been described only in connection with plant dye from woad. Isidore of Seville writes in the year 600 that the 'Scots' would prick (*punctum*) their body with a needle and then rub in dye from a native plant, in a reference thought to be referring to the Picts rather than the Irish.[465] Eventually the church took matters in hand, and the decree of a papal legatine synod in 787 outlawed all forms of decorating the body with *diabolo instinctu* ('diabolical marks').[466] Skin ornamentation was clearly a deep-seated cultural practice, and its lingering presence might help explain why cultural problems with baptismal immersion lasted so long, should the two be connected in the way that will be proposed here.

The efficacy of such skin decoration was apotropaic, given the frequent references to and depictions of Picts, Caledonians and Britons fighting naked, as Wagner concludes:

> Fighting naked was not an act of wanton bravery, but an invocation to divine protection, perhaps connected with the magical symbols painted on their bodies.[467]

In summary we know virtually nothing from the written record about the beliefs and ritual practices of the ancient Britons other than this frequently observed habit of decorating their skin and consequently wearing nothing or as little as possible. The colouring on the skin was culturally a form of clothing; the evidence strongly suggests if nothing else that nakedness and body decoration were two sides of the same coin. It can be concluded with some confidence that the skin was considered sacred or spiritually significant because of the decorations on it. From this context, it is tentatively proposed that this skin decoration made the people reluctant to immerse themselves fully in water.

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[465] Wagner (2002), p 26; Isidore of Seville's observation appears in *Origines* 1.9, ch. 2.
[466] Papal legate report from George, bishop of Ostia, to Pope Hadrian I, ch. 19, in Haddan and Stubbs (1871), p 458.
[467] Wagner (2002), p 28.

It is not clear exactly whether and how the tales of beasts lurking in the Pictish waterways relate to the magical properties of painted skin, but as demonstrated throughout this thesis, a fear of nature is also a fear for the human body, an embodied and visceral reaction against threats both physical and spiritual. This is perhaps the best context in which to understand the curious cursed well which Columba encounters on his mission to Pictland. The water could pass on its baneful effect through touching, and was believed to induce a form of *leprosi* ('leprosy'), as well as blindness and crippling.[468] It might be that the cluster of clothed bathing references in this area relate to the same inhibition about water covering the skin, either an attempt to protect it from the effects of immersion or more likely an indication that the bather had no intention of getting wet all over. The anonymous monk of Lindisfarne might well have clad Cuthbert in a loincloth simply because it was not customary to enter fully into the water.

This thesis interrogates three centuries of poorly documented history, and as such any conclusions are by their nature speculative, particularly when it comes to the matter of pre-Christian religious beliefs. Evidence from as many angles as possible is required before making any claim about cultural attitudes deep enough to cause a fluctuation in the imposition of catholic Christianity, but the evidence presented in this research suggests a range of associations connected to the body and to natural water itself, any one of which might have generated a deeply held aversion to full-bodied immersion. Certainly the evidence points to something deeply held within British cultures. It might be objected that Christian bathing practices, on which these arguments are partly based, were introduced from Ireland by Columba, but the weight of evidence strongly suggests otherwise. Irish baptismal practice is not known to have deviated from Roman custom, and Appendix A lists several Irish bathing incidents that associate cold-water immersion

[468] *Vita Columbae* II.11, examined in detail above, chapter 6.

with psalm singing rather than crucifixion imagery. A third point of note is that the Picts had received Christian missions for well over a century before Columba arrived, with evidence of the missionary St Ninian in the early 5th century recorded by Bede,[469] and indications of monasticism in the north-east of the region at Portmahomack that perhaps pre-dates Columba's arrival by a decade.[470] Cuthbert, as has been seen, also embellished his missionary work to the Picts with water-based interventions.

The ritual of foot washing that was introduced into north European and particularly Celtic Christian communities would provided the perfect solution for a form of baptism that would be acceptable in the face of such long-held cultural values of the native Britons. A switch from full-body immersion to a focus on washing the feet also had impeccable patristic credentials in the shape of Ambrosian baptismal practice. Yet as will be discussed in the following chapter, such practice would have carried with it a theological deviation from Roman practice and belief dating from the final decades of the Roman empire, a long-dormant controversy that burst into life when Augustine of Canterbury arrived and urged Britons to fully embrace the font as a place of symbolic rebirth, a bodily expression of renewal.

[469] *HE* III.4
[470] Martin Carver, *Portmahomack: Monastery of the Picts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

CHAPTER 9

Foot washing: An Ambrosian counterpart to the font

The British evidence examined so far reveals at least three strands of theological and ritual significance that can be found in the northern bathing rituals: baptismal immersion, foot washing and crucifixion. Despite appearing at first glance to be three very different expressions of Christian devotion, these three were explained and even performed in tight proximity to one another in the baptismal scheme of Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), whose influence on northern European baptismal practice has been noted several times in this research.

Ambrose has been somewhat eclipsed by the eventual dominance of his southern counterpart Augustine of Hippo (d. 430). Yet at the time when the semi-independent British church was developing its liturgy and theology, Ambrose's writings and teachings were highly influential in shaping north European expressions of a wide range of church liturgies and cultural practices. His innovations surrounding the theology and practice of foot washing found long-term resonance in the shape of the baptismal liturgy as recorded in Milanese, Gallican and Celtic liturgical texts. Ambrose's two baptismal treatises offer a remarkably close match with all of the salient points about northern British ritual interaction with natural water identified in this research, and that was by no means the end of his influence on baptismal liturgies of both Celtic and Gallican origin. This section of research identifies further parallels between the language, imagery and physical enactment of the baptismal rite as envisaged by Ambrose and the evidence of water-based devotional activity in Celtic Christianity in Britain.

The Gallican influence on early British Christianity has been recognised by scholars,[471] but if Duchesne's claim that Gallican liturgy can be considered inseparable from Ambrosian liturgy is even partly correct,[472] the trajectory of research needs to continue all the way to Ambrose himself.

9.1 Ambrosian and Roman baptismal practices

Ambrose himself acknowledged that some of his teaching and practice of baptism was at variance from the customs of Rome, divergences that were diplomatically rejected by Augustine of Hippo, as will be described. It is difficult to conclude for certain that the patterns of this patristic dispute found an afterlife in the north Atlantic islands, but the many striking similarities between Ambrosian baptismal theology and Celtic bathing rituals by themselves help to underline the extent to which the latter was inspired by the exegetical and cosmological possibilities of baptism.

Furthermore, scholars and popular writers frequently seek to identify the influence that Pelagius had on shaping Celtic Christian culture. A study by Michael Herren and Shirley Ann Brown concludes that Pelagian influence persisted in Britain for centuries, and point out that although several early medieval writings from Britain repudiate Pelagian ideas there are texts which appear to vacillate between grace-based and nature-based explanations for sanctity.[473] Yet in Ambrose there is a far less marginal figure of the same period whose ecclesiastical and theological reach was greater, and whose legacy was far less controversial.

Perhaps most significantly for this research into the performance of baptism in northern British contexts, it was Ambrose who raised the status of foot washing to a dimension

[471] Blair (2005), p 16.
[472] Cited above, chapter 6.
[473] Michael Herren and Shirley Ann Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity: Britain and Ireland from the Fifth to the Tenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), p 96.

of the ritual as significant as washing in the font. In an important passage of *De mysteriis*, Ambrose sets out in unambiguous terms his position that baptism in the font was a means of washing away one's own personal sins, whereas the function of foot washing was to remove sin inherited from Adam. In an exegetical aside on the Gospel account of foot washing in John 13, Ambrose explains why Jesus insisted on washing Peter's feet:

> Mundus erat Petrus, sed plantam lauare debebat; habebat enim primi hominis de successione peccatum, quando eum subplantauit serpens et persuasit errorem. Ideo planta eius abluitur, ut haereditaria peccata tollantur. Nostra enim propria per baptismum relaxantur.
>
> Peter was clean, but he needed to wash his feet; for he still had sin by derivation from the first man, when the serpent tripped him and led him into trespass. His foot is washed that hereditary sins may be removed; for our own sins are remitted by baptism.[474]

He notes moreover in the *De sacramentis* that this practice was not followed in Rome:

> Succinctus, inquam, summus sacerdos pedes tibi lauit... Non ignoramus quod ecclesia romana hanc consuetudinem non habeat, cuius typum in omnibus sequimur et formam. Hanc tamen consuetudinem non habet ut pedes lauet. Vide ergo, forte propter multitudinem declinauit. Sunt tamen qui dicant et excusare conentur quia hoc non in mysterio faciendum est, non in baptismate, non in regeneratione, sed quasi hospiti pedes lauandi sint. Aliud est humilitatis, aliud sanctificationis... Hoc ideo dico non quo alios reprehendam, sed mea officia ipse commendem. In omnibus cupio sequi ecclesiam romanam, sed tamen et nos hominis sensum habemus. Ideo quod alibi rectius seruatur et nos rectius custodimus.
>
> the high priest, I say, was girt up, and washed thy feet... We are not ignorant that the Roman Church has not this custom. Her type and form we follow in all things; however she has not this custom of washing the feet. See then, perhaps she has declined it on account of the numbers. There are, however, some who say and try to urge that this ought to be done, not as a sacrament, not at baptism, not at the regeneration; but only as we should wash the feet of a guest. The latter is an act of humility, the former a work of sanctification... This I say, not to find fault with others, but to recommend my own usage. In all things I desire to follow the Roman Church. Yet we too are not without discernment; and what other places have done well to retain, we too do well to maintain.[475]

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[474] Ambrose: *De mysteriis* 6.32, original Botte (1949), p 118; translation Thompson & Srawley (1919), p 58.
[475] Ambrose: *De sacramentis* 3.1.4-5, original Chadwick (1960), p 24-5; translation Thompson & Srawley (1919), p 98-99.

The reference to a divergence of opinion between Rome and northern Italy in the performance of baptism is expressed as clearly as possible. Ambrose claims that the *pedilavium* is the only aspect of the Milanese rite that is different to Roman customs,[476] although there are other striking elements of his ritual scheme that would appear to have no parallel in other baptismal practices, such as dipping a crucifix in the font and expanding the credal question about Christ during immersion to include reference to the cross, described in chapter 6. It is however true that foot washing is the only Ambrosian innovation to be contested in early writings about baptism, and is therefore a uniquely prominent aspect of his exposition. In drawing attention to this innovation, Ambrose acknowledges the interpretation of foot washing as purely an act of hospitality, contrasting it with his own theology that it denoted something of the highest possible sacramental significance. In this passage he further acknowledges that foot washing was also an exercise in humility. Nor is this the only time that Ambrose makes such a claim about foot washing, since it appears again in his exposition on the Psalms, and in a lost commentary on Isaiah that is cited briefly by Augustine in his argument against Pelagian heresy.[477]

The anti-Pelagian context of the foot-washing ritual will be developed further below, but for now it is only necessary to note that Augustine had decidedly mixed feelings about Ambrose's bold claims for the efficacy of the *pedilavium*. The interaction between Ambrose and Augustine over the ritual of baptism, including the former's own administration of the rite to Augustine in Milan in 387, has been compiled in a compelling narrative interpretation by Garry Wills.[478] In this he documents the debate

[476] Johnson (1999), p 137.
[477] Ambrose: *Exp. in Psalm xlviii*. 8.9; Augustine: *duas epistolas Pelag.* iv.11, in *NPNF* (ser. 1, Vol. 5) book 4, ch. 29, p 806.
[478] Garry Wills, *Font of Life : Ambrose, Augustine, and the Mystery of Baptism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

between the two fathers of the church over many aspects of Christian initiation, including their respective positions on the agency and meaning of foot washing.

Ambrose included his highly charged *pedilavium* as part of the overall baptismal experience, conducted before the neophyte left the baptistery, yet it is clear that these were not entirely united as a single action. For Augustine this separation between font and foot as two sites of baptismal cleansing introduced a dual source of sin, which was highly problematic for his centrepiece theology on the effects of the Fall. From his perspective, hereditary sin passed on from Adam could not be separated from one's own personal failings, but rather pervaded every aspect of an individual's life, for which he cited as evidence the selfishness of newborn infants.[479]

This institution of foot washing as an important Christian ritual greatly predates the custom of bishops washing the feet of the clergy on Maundy Thursday. This is first attested in a Roman *Ordo* of the 7th century, which describes how the Pope himself would wash the feet of his attendants.[480] It is also mentioned in the third canon of the 17th Council of Toledo in 694 as ritual that had fallen into disuse, indicating significant earlier history.[481] Another early reference to this Maundy Thursday performance in the 7th century is found in Bede's prose *Vita sancti Cuthberti*, demonstrating again a formal liturgical context in which to place Cuthbert's foot washing activities – and it is surely no coincidence that Bede chose a tradition practised in Rome.[482] It is essential therefore when considering the cosmological dimension of Cuthbert's foot washing that Ambrose leaves open a multiplicity of meanings for a ritual that he did more than any other western church father to promote. Other scholars are not wrong to discern the exercise

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[479] *Ibid*. p 115-6. For Augustine's reference to the sin of newborn infants, Wills cites Augustine: *Confessions* 1.8, although 1.11-12 is more explicit about this.
[480] James Monti, *The Week of Salvation: History and Traditions of Holy Week* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1993), p 110.
[481] *Ibid*. p 110; Thompson & Srawley (1919), p 58, *n*. 1.
[482] *VCP* ch. 13, p 218-9.

of hospitality, therefore, but that is by no means the limit of its significance. It was originally seen by Ambrose as not merely an adjunct to the baptismal immersion, but rather as an integral part of the baptism itself. The disruptive potential of this innovation will be considered in a British context.

9.2 Cuthbert's foot washing in an Ambrosian theological context

Ambrose's theology is not only starkly distinctive, it is starkly expressed too. The evidence that the foot washing of the sea creatures/otters in the hagiographies of Cuthbert touched on such a radical theology has been presented in chapter 7, which investigates manuscript evidence that Bede initially described the foot-washing sea creatures as removing *sordes*, filth, from the saint's legs.

Lapidge considered the phrase to be merely clumsy, but in in the light of Ambrose and hence early church understanding of the potential scope of foot washing, it would seem that a theological explanation is much better employed here. Rather than considering the 'filth' to be sea weed that the sea creatures wipe off, it might well be that Bede has something rather more spiritual in mind, as another example of his relatively rare use of the noun *sordes* twice in this passage from his *Homilies* indicates:

> Dignatus est lauari aquis Iordanicis qui erat mundus a sordibus cunctis ut ad diluendas nostrorum sordes scelerum omnium fluenta sanctificaret aquarum.
>
> He deigned to be washed in the waters of the Jordan although he was clean of all stains, so that he might sanctify the flowing of water for the washing away of the stains of all our wicked deeds.[483]

In this exegesis, Bede is following Ambrose's commentary on Luke.[484]

There is no explicit reference to the connection between foot washing and the removal of sin in the anonymous *vita*, and only the Besançon evidence in Bede. But it is possible

[483] Bede: *Homelia* I.12; CCSL 122, p 81; Martin & Hurst (1991, bk 1), p 114.
[484] Martin & Hurst (1991, bk 1), p 114, n. 8, Ambrose: *Expos. evang. sec. Luc.* 3, 21-22.

to discern such a theology in the consequences of the ministry as it was conducted on the seashore. The overall missionary context in which Anonymous places Cuthbert's devotions on the strand demonstrate the broadest understanding of the saint's outreach to creation, an outreach that precipitates a cosmological reconciliation of fallen humanity with fallen nature.

In his homilies, Bede talks about foot washing in baptismal terms, and compares the two directly in his commentary on Jesus' washing his disciples feet on Maundy Thursday, cited twice in chapter 7 and repeated in briefer form here:

> Vbi aperte monstratur quod haec lauatio pedum spiritalem carnis et animae purificationem sine qua ad consortium Christi perueniri non potest insinuat...
>
> Pedes namque quibus incedentes terram tangimus ideoque eos a contagione pulueris sicut reliquum corpus inmunes custodire nequimus ipsam terrenae inhabitationis necessitatem designant...
>
> qui ablutus est fonte baptismatis in remissionem omnium peccatorum non indiget rursus immo non potest eodem modo ablui
>
> Here it is clearly being pointed out that the washing of the feet implies the spiritual purification of body and soul without which we cannot arrive at fellowship with Christ...
>
> Our feet, by which we move about [and] touch the ground (and for this reason we cannot keep them free from contact with dirt, as [we can] the rest of our bodies) signify the necessity of our living upon the earth...
>
> the person who has been cleansed in the baptismal font and [has received] pardon for all his sins has no need to be cleansed again; moreover he cannot be cleansed again in the same way.[485]

On the evidence of this homily, Bede is reasonably comfortable about retaining the connection between foot washing and the removal of sin, but this comes with a qualification of considerable significance. Foot washing is described as a repeatable act of cleansing, in contrast to baptism which can not be repeated. It was Ambrose who muddied these waters considerably, describing baptismal foot washing as a one-off

[485] Bede: Homily II.5, *CCSL* 122, p 216-7; translation Martin & Hurst (1991 bk. 2), p 46-7.

ritual to remove sin inherited from Adam, and leaving the font to wash away one's personal sins. Bede is clearly asserting the Catholic resolution on this issue, following Augustine of Hippo, but is he also making a point here about the Celtic foot washing and reminding readers of the primacy of the font? He appears to be presenting a mirror opposite of the Ambrosian scheme, stressing that the font washes away *omnium peccatorum*, 'all sins', and is unrepeatable, whereas foot washing is a repeatable action that removes the accumulated dirt of everyday life. This certainly gives an unambiguously baptismal pedigree to daily bathing rituals, as has been noted above, but also appears to be clarifying the comparative sacramental values of foot washing and the font.

If the Celtic baptismal ritual had indeed been derived from the performance of foot washing rather than immersion, as this research proposes, it would also make it much easier to understand why there was also a deviation from the Trinitarian formula, mentioned in chapter 8. The only name invoked at foot washing in the Bobbio Missal and the Stowe Missal is Jesus Christ, with no reference to Father or Holy Spirit. When Ambrose talks about foot washing in *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis* there is again only a reference to Jesus' washing his disciples feet, but the ritual is followed immediately by the application of the *signaculum spiritale*, 'spiritual seal', to the neophyte. Ambrose does not give any indication as to whether this did or did not involve any unction, but the term 'spiritual seal' is sufficient reference to the third person of the Trinity.[486] Foot washing is therefore a baptismal ritual that omits reference to God as Father. Augustine of Canterbury stresses that correct baptism needs to be

[486] *De mysteriis* VII.42 (original p 121; translation p 63); *De sacramentis* 3.2.8 (original p 25; translation p 100). For the nature of this somewhat puzzling reference to the spiritual seal, see Thomson & Srawley (1910) p 63 *n*. 2 and the introduction, p xxv-xxvi; also Johnson (1999), p 137-40 for a full discussion.

conducted as a rebirth *to God*, and the *pedilavium* is the only washing ritual that can be identified in early baptismal texts that would omit such a reference.

9.3 The Celtic baptismal deviation

All of the evidence compiled in this research points towards a cluster of devotional bathing and baptismal practices that together appear to share the same contested elements in the early British church, specifically a divergence of practice over the way the immersion is conducted. It is possible at this stage to propose a very rough scheme for what might be the shape of the disputed Celtic baptismal ritual, albeit with a warning that this is highly speculative. It would also be misleading to propose that this represents any sort of fixed or consistent baptismal liturgy in any part of the church in early medieval Europe, not least because of the wide variations that can be seen in the language and rubric of rituals, even when they are close enough to be considered part of a family of sacramentary texts. Even so, certain elements appear sufficiently pronounced to indicate some likely characteristics.

> First, an exorcism was performed over a body of water, with a pronounced emphasis on the efficacy of a cross shape to effect a spiritual change in the water. Evidence suggests both the drawing of a cross in the air by hand over the element, and also an embodiment of the cross itself through the cross-vigil posture of devotional bathing. It is possible that this cross posture could have been used during the baptismal ritual.
>
> Second, any immersion in the water was partial, involving the lower half of the body. There was no full-bodied immersion in the water, no evocation of rebirth and no Trinitarian triple affusion or similar.
>
> Third, there was no nakedness in the Celtic performance of baptism. This might simply be a mundane reflection of the fact that there would be no point in

undressing if the candidate were not being fully immersed, or it might reflect superstitions about the body.

Fourth, on emergence from the water with wet legs, a foot wiping and drying would be conducted which was considered to be the point at which sins were washed away, a ritual in which Jesus Christ and perhaps the Holy Spirit were invoked, but not God the Father.

All elements of the scheme above have clear precedent in Ambrosian baptismal liturgy. On three salient points – the exorcism, the imposition of the cross and the *pedilavium* – the only precedents that this research has uncovered in European baptismal practice arise exclusively in the writings of Ambrose and were perpetuated in an associated family of baptismal liturgies. It is also clear that there would have been some deviation from the full baptismal ritual, specifically the triple immersion or affusion accompanied by Trinitarian credal questions, which were very much part of Ambrose's liturgical scheme, although for him this immersion would only remove a candidate's personal sins accumulated during his or her lifetime. In the absence of this central focus on the font, the ritual appears to fragment into dislocated elements of Ambrosian origin, driven by or in response to persistent pre-Christian anxiety about natural water. Perhaps it demonstrates above all that Augustine was entirely right to regard Ambrose's stress on the efficacy of foot-washing as a potentially destabilising innovation.

As has also been developed in this research, alternative bathing and baptismal language used by opponents of Celtic custom stress elements that are entirely lacking in the above scheme: a full-bodied immersion invoking nakedness and insisting on the Trinitarian credal questions. This was the point in the ritual which was conventionally

described as a rebirth by all commentators – although Ambrose barely uses such imagery himself and does not describe the font as a womb.[487]

9.4 Baptismal immersion as suffering, crucifixion and penitence

In addition to foot washing, Ambrose writes of other idiosyncratic additions to the baptismal ritual that merit brief investigation here. As has been seen in the previous section, foot washing sheds an interesting light on Cuthbert's interaction with the sea creatures. The following section finds further parallels between Ambrose's unusually pronounced focus on crucifixion during immersion in the font and the practice identified in this research and by other scholars of a ritual in which a crucifix posture was adopted while standing in the sea, tentatively proposed as the 'Ionan bathing ritual'. As described above, Ambrose's *De mysteriis* refers to the dipping of a wooden crucifix in the font.

The theological connection between baptism and crucifixion has substantial precedent in patristic writings. John Chrysostom is among the most prominent to explore the parallels between the two, but the use of an actual wooden crucifix to mark the water appears a markedly Ambrosian innovation, the introduction of a physical sign to make what seems elsewhere a more abstract, typological connection.

The suggestion of a physical trial in baptism is an interesting parallel with the asceticism of bathing traditions examined in this research, and is given further emphasis by Ambrose's references to death and the crucifixion. The first immersion is described as a fulfilment of God's sentence of death on Adam and Eve: *Ideo fons quasi sepultura*

[487] The only two references in his baptismal treatises are in *De mysteriis* IV.20, where he loosely cites John 3:5 ("except a man be born anew of water and of the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (Thompson & Srawley (1919), p 52) and in *De mysteriis* IX.59 where he cites the previous verse, John 3:4 ("Have we entered into our mother's womb and been born again?" (Thompson & Srawley (1919), p 73)).

est ('The font is, as it were, a burial.')[488] The second immersion is given an even more striking connection to crucifixion:

> Cum enim mergis, mortis suscipis et supulturæ similitudinem, crucis illius accipis sacramentum, quod in cruce Christus pependit
>
> When you dip, you take on the likeness of death and burial, you receive the sacrament of that cross, because Christ hung on the cross.[489]

and

> in baptismate autem quasi specialiter concrucifigeris Christo
>
> In baptism you are, as it were, specially crucified with Christ.[490]

In *De spiritu sancto*, cited above (chapter 8) in connection with baptism in the name of one person of the Trinity, Ambrose warms to this theme, offering a dual agency to the different elements of baptism by water (as burial) and the spirit (as renewal):

> in illo aquarum sepelimur elemento, ut renovati per spiritum resurgamus. In aqua enim imago mortis, in spiritu pignus est vitae, ut per aquam moriatur corpus peccati, quae quasi quodam tumulo corpus includit, et per virtutem spiritus renovemur a morte peccati.
>
> [W]e are buried in the element of water that we may rise again renewed by the Spirit. For in the water is the representation of death, in the Spirit is the pledge of life, that the body of sin may die through the water, which encloses the body as it were in a kind of tomb, that we, by the power of the Spirit, may be renewed from the death of sin, being born again in God.[491]

It is instructive that the translator prefers the single MS copy that uses the verb 'born again' to conclude the Ambrosian formula, an entirely logical form of words but one that is surprisingly absent from other MS records of a passage otherwise pregnant with such symbolism. Ambrose prefers to use *renovemur*, renewed. The 'death' of burial in the font certainly provides an alternative perspective from which to consider mortification of the flesh in cold water immersions. As described above, scholars have

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[488] Ambrose: *De sacramentis* 2.6.19 (Chadwick (1960) p 21; Thompson & Srawley (1919) p 92).
[489] Ambrose: *De sacramentis* 2.7.23 (original p 22; translation p 94).
[490] Ambrose: *De sacramentis* 6.2.8 (original p 47; translation p 131).
[491] Ambrose: *De spiritu sancto* 1.6.76 *CSEL* 79, p 47; translation in *NPNF* Second Series Vol. 10, p 103, cited in Ferguson (2009), p 645.

interpreted Evagrius Ponticus' prototype of naked cold water bathing without reference to possible baptismal connotations, yet this brief investigation into the theology of one contemporary bishop indicates there is an evocative similarity.

Ambrose also offers a notably physical metaphor for the experience that the catechumens were about to undergo, comparing their pre-baptismal anointing to that of an athlete preparing for competition:

> Unctus es quasi athleta Christi, quasi luctam huius saeculi luctaturus, professus es luctaminis tui certamina.
>
> Thou wast anointed as Christ's athlete; as about to wrestle in the fight of this world, thou didst profess the objects of thy wrestling.[492]

The image of the athlete stripping for sport raises the subject of baptismal nudity, a topic that has already been addressed, but in this context it can be seen that Ambrose placed a significant emphasis on baptism as a physical trial, to the point of being a recapitulation of Christ's death on the cross. The parallels with the crucifixion posture of Ionan bathing is by itself remarkable, and Cuthbert's bathing at Coldingham has yet more detail that bears comparison with this baptismal model. As Anonymous and Bede write in every version of Cuthbert's *vitae*, the saint is observed by a monk from the shore. The effect of witnessing the bathing ritual seems curiously over-stated:

> clericus uero familiae supradictus in scopulosis locis latens, uisi pauidus eet tremebundus, tota nocte coangustatus prope mortem accederat.
>
> The above-mentioned cleric of the community lay hidden among the rocks, frightened and trembling at the sight and, being in anguish all night long, he came nigh to death.[493]

Bede's reworking of the condition of the spying monk in his earlier, metrical *vita* amplifies this imagery:

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[492] *De sacramentis* 1.2.4 (original p 10; translation p 77); he makes the same comment in Ambrose: *De Helia et ieiunio* 21.79; *CSEL* 32.2.
[493] *VCA* II.3, p 80-81.

> Haec comes ut uidit perculsus corda pauore,
> Semianimem curuo flatum trahit abditus antro.
>
> As the companion watches these things, he is struck to the heart with fear and, hidden in his curved cave, he draws half-dying breath.[494]

Bede's alterations emphasise even further this notion of an induced death and burial, the spying monk hiding in a cave as he watches the ritual on the shore. Dawn comes and the ailing monk throws himself at Cuthbert's feet and finds forgiveness for his sin, the story wreathed in echoes not just of baptism but also its figural connections, the monk drawn in mimetically not just to Cuthbert's own ritual enactment but ultimately to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is almost as if these two writers can not help themselves from describing the scene allegorically.

Yet in the Ionan bathing ritual the term allegory is simply inadequate to describe the extent to which immersion is shaped by crucifixion, the very posture of adopting the shape of a crucifix an embodiment of the symbolism of death in the font. The suggestion that the spying monk came close to death is toned down in Bede's later prose *vita*, and the suggestive tomb-like cave setting is downgraded to a reference to cliffs, once again indicating that the more mature Bede might have had second thoughts about the unrestrained use of such symbolically charged details.[495]

All parts of creation are drawn into Cuthbert's bathing ritual, the otters and the monk taking their place in a sacrament as physical and as embodied as it is possible to be. Many elements of a baptismal cosmology can be discerned in all descriptions of Cuthbert's bathing ritual, a multi-faceted hagiographical incident that appears to be shaped by some of the most sophisticated and influential theological writing on the baptismal ritual. The cosmological reach of this immersion is well founded in patristic

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[494] *VCM* ll. 235-6, trans. Lapidge (1989), p 91 *n.* 46.
[495] *VCP* ch. 10, p 190-191; Colgrave translates the spying monk's fear as 'deadly', perhaps thinking of the anonymous account, but 'unnatural' would be a more accurate translation of the adjective *ingenti*.

exegesis, and from a different perspective so too are the littoral crucifixions of the Ionan monks. All of the water-based rituals examined in this reasearch, from the many exorcisms through Columba's crucifixions to Cuthbert's foot washing and his half-dying companion, are entirely reflective of patristic exegesis on baptism, and in the case of Cuthbert closely follow the progression of baptismal liturgy too.

9.5 The cosmological function of Christ's baptism

Ambrose among many others stated clearly that Jesus underwent baptism in order to prepare creation for our baptism, rather than to wash away his own sins.[496] In his commentary on Luke, he talks without reservation about an issue that had vexed the early church: the purpose of Jesus' baptism,[497] while in *De sacramentis* he sets out in plain language that Jesus had not been baptised for his own repentance but for the benefit of humans:

> Non enim ablutio peccatorum suorum Christo necessaria erat *qui peccatum non fecit*, sed nobis erat necessaria qui peccato manemus obnoxii. Ergo si propter nos baptismum, nobis forma est constituta, fidei nostræ forma proposita est.
>
> For the washing away of his sins was not necessary for Christ, who did no sin; but it was necessary for us who remain subject to sin. Therefore, if baptism is for our sake, a pattern has been established for us, the pattern of our faith has been set forth.[498]

Patristic writers even saw a correspondence between Christ's descent into the font and Christ's descent into *Sheol*, the Hebrew place of the dead, demonstrating that the Saviour operated across all levels of creation, moving from the depths to the heights, exorcising natural water of demonic powers that lurked in the abyss awaiting to devour

[496] Blowers (2012), p 151 describes Ambrose's views as ultimately representative of a wide range of patristic exegesis.
[497] Ambrose: *Expos. in Lucam* 2.83 and 4.5-6 (*CSEL* 32.4, p 87, p 141).
[498] *De sacramentis* 1.5.16 in Chadwick (1960), p 13; Thompson & Srawley (1919), p 81-2.

those who attempted a baptismal immersion.[499] Such a link between descent into the font and descent into *Sheol* might sound far-fetched, as Paul Blowers acknowledges, were it not for the fact that the waters already bear this meaning as a demonic abode in the Bible itself.[500] In this context, Ambrose writes of Jesus' thaumaturgy, quelling the storm to demonstrate both his primal role in the Creation, where he directs the elements, and his ongoing role as redeemer of creation, where he casts out the unclean spirits within it, divinity incarnated and operating within creation itself.[501]

This high-level typological theology might seem at some remove from the activities of a saint in northern Britain on a gloomy North Sea shore, but context is everything. The bathing of Cuthbert, as demonstrated above, was first framed by Anonymous as a prelude to his mission to Pictland, a place where Columba had encountered so many dangers lurking at the bottom of rivers, pools and the sea. The sea creatures at Coldingham and the beast in the river Ness emerged from this same watery universe, counterparts to one another in a Christian narrative of exorcism, blessing, redemption and reconciliatory mission. Counterparts not in terms of a mere literary sequel or symbolic gesture but a bold and full-bodied immersion into a sea teeming with pre-Christian stories of monsters, drownings and poisons. Rather like the goat/human mannikin Paul the Hermit meets on his journey into the desert, a representative of the old Pagan gods who professes himself a Christian, this is a redemptive theology that seeks conversion and reconciliation over confrontation.[502] Missionary theology need not always be so forgiving, but it was in the islands of Britain. Christianity here was a faith

[499] Blowers (2012), p 254-5 cites variations on this theme from texts including the anonymous 5th-century catechism *The Teaching of St. Greogory* and Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catechetical Lectures*, 3.11-12).
[500] Luke 8:31; Revelations 9:1, 17:8, 20:1.
[501] Ambrose: *Expos. in Lucam* 4.68-9; discussed in Blowers (2012), p 257-8, and p 258 *n*. 57 for an anti-Pelagian context.
[502] Jerome: *Vita Pauli*, ch. 8.

that liberated the land and lakes from the deep-seated fears and superstitions of the local people, participants in a missionary campaign that borrowed repeatedly from the primary Christian ritual of conversion, baptism at the full extent of its cosmological reach.

It is difficult to overstate the significance that was attached to baptismal mission during the conversion era, particularly in light of the fact that at least part of the ritual – foot washing – was repeatable, as Bede acknowledges, even though an individual Christian's actual baptismal entry into the church was not.[503] One of the very few personal statements that survives of any missionary from this period is Patrick's *Confessio*. In this he refers to baptism seven times, and not once to any of the other liturgical performances, such as the Eucharist. In his *Letter to Coroticus* he refers to baptism eight times, twice to anointing after baptism (ch. 3) and once to penance (ch. 7). The evidence of Patrick's own understanding and performance of the baptismal rite is a major subject in its own right, but it would appear that he followed the Trinitarian formula and post-baptismal anointing, and also talks of baptism as rebirth (*renascerentur*).[504] Patrick's own training as a priest is somewhat obscure but there are suggestions that he was connected to both Rome and Auxerre.[505] Certainly Palladius, the first bishop of the Irish, was sent directly by Pope Celestine I (d. 432), according to the near contemporary record by Prosper of Aquitaine.[506]

However it must be acknowledged here that other scholars have claimed to see the influence of Pelagius in Celtic baptismal liturgy, both in Britain and Ireland. Sybil

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[503] As cited above: Bede: *Homily* II.5, *CCSL* 122, p 216-8; translation Martin & Hurst (1991 bk 2) p 46-8.
[504] Patrick: *Confessio* ch. 28; cf Sybil McKillop, 'A Romano-British Baptismal Liturgy?', in *The Early Church in Western Britain and Ireland BAR British Series 102*, ed. by Susan M. Pearce (Oxford, 1982), pp 35–48, at p 39-40.
[505] Muirchú: *Vita sancti Patricii*, I.6.
[506] Prosper: *Chronicle* c. 1307, 431AD.

McKillop's study of early British baptism concludes that there are marked similarities between Patrick's performance of the ritual and what can be reconstructed of Pelagian writers' understanding of it, because there are no surviving references to Patrick's use of four rites that the Pelagians supposedly omitted: exorcism of the candidate, the *ephpheta*, foot washing and the laying on of hands by a bishop.[507] It is difficult to know for certain whether Patrick omitted any of these rituals, because the evidence is so limited, and to a great extent McKillop is arguing from textual silence. Other scholars have also argued that Columba's missionary activity has indications of baptism as an adult-only or even end-of-life ritual, and furthermore that Columba's *vita* testifies to two pagans who lived a good lives without sin on the strength of their own virtues.[508] The connection between these and Pelagian practice is however one of several possible explanations, particularly in the case of delaying baptism until adulthood, which was relatively common in the early church.[509] The conclusion presented in this thesis, that Ionan missionaries either adapted their baptismal liturgy or adopted local baptismal practices in order to accommodate the inhibitions of northern Britons, requires no greater degree of recognition that liturgical matters were moulded by cultural pressures than such models proposed by other historians. It is clear from his many other interactions with the watery places of the Pictish landscape that Columba was adapting to the local environment, a vista which baptismal symbolism was more than capable of encompassing.

Paul Blowers writes most lucidly concerning baptism as an event of cosmological significance and reach in the minds of patristic writers. The embodiment of so much

[507] McKillop (1982), p 43.
[508] Herren & Brown (2002), p 134 on baptism, p 95 on two pagans.
[509] Ferguson (2009), p 629.

biblical and theological tradition in physical form demonstrates the performative power of church ritual at its most compelling:

> No practice of the early Christian age more thoroughly embodied the dynamic interaction between Creator and creation, and the inauguration of new creation, than baptism. The liturgy of baptism quickly became saturated with typological and symbolical nuances[510]

Thomas O'Loughlin, writing about Adomnán's *De locis sanctis*, considers the author's use of baptismal imagery to describe rainfall washing the streets of the city of Jerusalem to go well beyond the limits of simple metaphor:

> to use a reference to the gateway mystery of the whole of the Christian life as simply a metaphor for rain used in an urban cleansing task would have seemed blasphemous to Adomnán, especially in a formal manual of exegesis. Moreover, we think of baptism as what happens to individuals, but until long after Adomnán's time there was the notion of the baptism of peoples (*gentes*) as well as of individuals; and if nations could be baptized so too could cities[511]

In Britain this use of baptismal liturgy appears to have reached something of an apogee in its ability to reform not just the soul and body of the candidate but the very fabric of the environment in which they lived.

The differences that can be discerned in devotional bathing practices therefore point to much more profound differences of opinion among theologians about the baptismal liturgy which shapes them: a ritual of ascetic penitence at one extreme or an all-embracing celebration of creation reborn at the other. These differences can influence many other aspects of Christian theology and practice, as further study of Ambrose's baptismal treatises demonstrates in the context of repentance. Part of the purpose of Ambrose's *De mysteriis* is to persuade catechumens of the need to complete their baptism. He wrote elsewhere against the practice of delaying baptism, and in doing so he acknowledges a certain degree of logic to the decision:

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[510] Blowers (2012), p 370.
[511] Thomas O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places: The Perceptions of an Insular Monk on the Locations of the Biblical Drama* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p 118.

> Bona ergo paenitentia, quae si non esset, omnes ad senectutem differrent ablutionis gratiam.
>
> If there were no place for penitence, everyone would defer the grace of cleansing by baptism to old age.[512]

Ambrose's theology is problematic on a number of points, and did not survive Augustine's scrutiny. If foot washing were a way of removing hereditary sin, then this rite would obviate the need for infant baptism and in theory permit a new believer to start a new life as a Christian freed from the stain of Adam and thus more able to justify a delay of baptism in the font until his or her deathbed. A theology of penitence and hence its ritualisation as penance are therefore also bound closely to baptismal theology. The debate is not an abstract one between two church fathers hundreds of miles to the south, since this same focus on penitential discipline finds its own echoes in the islands of Britain and Ireland. In the seeds of Ambrosian theology about baptism there lie dormant not just two of the striking cultural expressions of Christianity in Celtic Christianity (foot washing and exorcising water) but also a reliance on penitence as a sacramental counterpart to baptism. Yet another parallel can thus be found in Ambrose's writing for Celtic practice. It was in Celtic theology that the formalisation of penance found full expression, as evidenced by the surviving *Penitentials* which date from as early as the late 6th century with the *Penitential of Finnian*.[513]

Ambrose deviated from Roman practice too, which would certainly help to explain a source for the liturgical dispute of the church in Britain if his influence at a seminal point in its history is accepted. What is particularly interesting is that Ambrose, whose ritual elements map closely on to all the salient characteristics of northern bathing, drew on John's gospel in order to support his notably pronounced emphasis on the events

[512] Ambrose: *De paenitentia* 2.11.98; *CSEL* 73, p 202; Ferguson (2009) p 635. Ambrose makes the same exhortation in *Expos. in Lucam* 4.76 and 7.221.
[513] O'Loughlin (2000) p 52.

surrounding the crucifixion, citing Peter's denial of Christ in a baptismal context and inserting a passage of John's gospel about the foot-washing ceremony.[514] This is of interest considering the claim by the Celtic faction at the Synod of Whitby that the authority for their deviation regarding the date of Easter was the Gospel writer John.[515]

9.6 Ambrose and the early church in Britain and Ireland

The one component obviously missing from the above research into the parallels between Ambrosian texts and the rituals of the northern saints is an explanation for how such ideas might have been transmitted from Milan in northern Italy at a seminal point in the formation of the British church. Certainly both of Ambrose's works on baptism were reasonably well-known in later Anglo-Saxon England, *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis* preserved in four manuscripts each, all of which date from the 11th or 12th centuries.[516] Michael Lapidge offers no suggested citations for either of them in Anglo-Saxon literature, although Bede cited many of Ambrose's other works.

The evidence is silent on which theological and liturgical texts were brought across the English Channel and the Irish Sea to Britain in the 5th century. But a comparison between the exorcism, bathing and baptismal activities of northern saints in the conversion era and the sacramental treatises of Ambrose show so many parallels that it is difficult to dismiss them all as coincidental. Scholars in the field of liturgical studies talk in terms of a 'families' of liturgical texts, as a way of identifying common rituals and language that are borrowed and adapted through several iterations. Such a term undoubtedly applies to the Gallican and Celtic liturgical texts, all of them marked out by their inclusion of a foot washing ceremony immediately after baptismal immersion, a

[514] Wills (2012) p 112-4.
[515] *HE* III.25.
[516] Lapidge (2008); a fifth edition of the *De mysteriis* is also thought to have originated in 11th century Canterbury.

feature that differentiates them sharply from Roman practice and points inexorably towards Milan. North European baptismal liturgy developed as part of an Ambrosian family in terms of both theology and practice, an identification that has considerable ramifications for the history of early medieval Christianity, not least because its differences were contested and ultimately supplanted by Roman custom. Other scholars have noted these connections in terms of Gallican liturgy, but the onward effect rippling out towards the north Atlantic islands is less well considered in terms of Gallican influences, and hardly investigated at all in terms of their Ambrosian source.[517]

There are no sufficiently early missals in existence to know in detail the baptismal rituals of the early British church before about 700, but for reasons outlined below it will be argued that the link between Ambrose's baptismal practice in Milan and the nascent Celtic church has one highly probable route of transmission: the mission of St Germanus to Britain in 429. It may well be chance that we happen to have such a detailed record of this mission in the shape of his *vita* by Constantius, but the visit is described in two sources from the 5th century, which in comparative terms is as good as this century's historical attestation offers. It was, by both accounts, a significant moment in Britain's church history, and according to the scheme of this thesis a seminal moment too in terms of its liturgical history.

Prosper of Aquitaine's near contemporary record of Germanus' mission is brief and states that the bishop was sent by direct instruction from the Pope:

> Agricola Pelagianus, Severiani episcopi Pelagiani filius, ecclesias Brittaniae dogmatis sui insinuatione corrumpit. sed ad insinuationem Palladii diaconi papa Caelestinus Germanum Autisidorensem episcopum vice sua mittit et deturbatis hereticis Britannos ad catholicam fidem dirigit.[518]

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[517] For the Ambrosian influence on Gallican rites see Duchesne, L. (1910), p 86-106; Bradshaw, Paul, *The Search of the Origins of Christian Worship* (London: SPCK, 1992), p 161-184.

[518] *MGH scriptores auctores antiquissimi* 9, in Mommsen, T. (Ed.) *Chronica minora saec. IV, V, VI, VII, vol. 1*. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1892), pp 341–499, at p 472.

> Agricola the Pelagian, the son of Bishop Severianus the Pelagian, corrupted the churches of Britain by introducing his own doctrine. On the recommendation of the deacon Palladius, Pope Celestine sent Germanus, bishop of Auxerre, as his representative, and when the heretics had been cast down, he guided the Britons to the Catholic faith.[519]

Pope Celestine I is known to have been sympathetic towards Ambrosian liturgical practice. He not only spent time in Milan but apparently lived with Ambrose, and was later quoting lines from Ambrose's hymns when he introduced new musical arrangements in Rome.[520] His own connections to the nascent Celtic Christianity of the islands of Britain and Ireland were not only channelled through Germanus, since he is also the Pope who sent Palladius and perhaps after him Patrick to serve as bishops in Ireland. It would be interesting to explore early Irish liturgy in light of this connection, particularly the Ambrosian emphasis on the exorcism of water and crucifixion imagery in baptism, although so far as can be ascertained there is no direct evidence of any deviation in Irish baptismal liturgy of the magnitude found in a British context, despite Sybil McKillop's claims about Pelagian influence on Patrick's baptismal practice.

Germanus himself had connections to Milan that are documented in his *vita*, including a trip where he attempted to enter the city incognito, but was revealed when a demon protested at his presence in a church. This might or might not be evidence that Germanus was previously unknown in the city, since he attempted the same anonymous arrival at Ravenna but was simply recognised by the sentinels.[521] In an intriguing footnote to the most recent translation of the *vita*, Hoare suggests that this visit to Milan took place in June 428, which would mean that Constantius has his narrative sequence

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[519] Prosper of Aquitaine: *Epitoma Chronicon* a. 429 Year 402 in Alexander Callander Murray, *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader (Readings in Medieval Civilizations & Cultures)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p 68.
[520] John Moorhead, *Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman World.* (London: Longman, 1999), p 213; John Francis Xavier Murphy, 'Pope St. Celestine I', in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. by Charles Herbermann (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1913), p 477-8.
[521] Constantius: *Vita Germani* chs. 32 for Milan, 35 for Ravenna.

out of order since he places it towards the end of Germanus' life.[522] Hoare does not cite any evidence for his assertion, which is based on reference to a festival celebrating the city's three patron saints. It is immediately apparent that this visit to Milan would have been the bishop's last substantial trip before he set off for Britain in early 429.

Whether or not Germanus did go to Milan shortly before his mission to Britain can not be ascertained for certain, but it does draw attention to the fact that the British mission would have required considerable planning, and not just from a logistical point of view. The Pelagian heresy in Britain was, according to both accounts of Germanus' mission, a serious threat to Roman Christianity, and as evidence from patristic writers further south abundantly indicates had a substantial intellectual pedigree. Germanus had to go equipped theologically and liturgically to deal with the challenges.

Did Germanus arm himself with Ambrosian theology and liturgy? There is one set-piece baptism in the *Vita Germani*, which takes place immediately before the army of newly baptised British Christians rout their Saxon and Pictish adversaries in the Alleluia victory. The reference to the ritual itself is too brief to offer any insight into its precise formulation, but Germanus clearly had some sort of texts with which to prepare the catechumens for the ritual:

> Aderant etiam quadragesimae venerabiles dies, quos relegiosiores reddebat praesentia sacerdotum, in tantum, ut, cotidianis praedicationibus instituti, certiam ad gratiam baptismatis convolarent
>
> It was the season of Lent and the presences of the bishops made the sacred forty days still more sacred; so much so that the soldiers, who received instruction in daily sermons, flew eagerly to the grace of baptism.[523]

Such instruction is intensive, but not without precedent: in the opening words of the *De sacramentis* Ambrose refers to his own daily sermons instructing catechumens.[524] This

[522] Noble & Head (1995), p 98, *n*. 26.
[523] *Vita Germani* ch. 17, p 264; translation in Noble & Head (1995), p 89.
[524] *De sacramentis* I.1: *De moralibus quotidianum sermonem habuimus* ('On questions of right conduct we discoursed daily').

alone indicates that Germanus came prepared with theological, liturgical and doctrinal materials, following continental practice. There is very little surviving evidence for the presence of any such texts in early medieval Britain, particularly in Celtic regions. Adomnán refers only to a book of hymns in the category of what might be considered Columba's liturgical texts, providing almost no other detail about the content of Ionan liturgy in his *vita*.[525] It seems almost certain that oral transmission was a significant factor in the dissemination and perhaps hence evolution of liturgies during the conversion era. As late as the turn of the 8th century Bede writes of a priest so incompetent in his ministry he was unable to learn the correct procedures for catechism and baptism, to the extent that his attempt to baptise a monk called Heribald was considered invalid and had to be performed properly by bishop John of Beverley.[526]

As Germanus' daily catechetical instruction indicates, his was a mission that attempted to reach the masses of the laity rather than simply calling wayward clerics to account or, as Bede's report of Augustine of Canterbury would have it 170 years later, focusing on negotiations with the royal courts. One important contextual point about this mission needs to be remembered: so far as the recorded evidence shows, Germanus made the last major episcopal intervention in the British church before the arrival of Augustine. The notion that Germanus left a lasting legacy, and that this legacy had time and space to evolve and adapt to local culture in part through oral transmission, seems a reasonable assumption, particularly when compared to the huge effect that the later Augustine was to have on the ecclesiastical landscape of Britain. The very least that can be said for certain is that Augustine encountered a church that had clearly been cut off from continental ecclesiastical practices for some time, and that Germanus' visit had left a lasting impression identifiable in a range of hagiographical and historical writings.

[525] *Vita Columbae* II.9; Sharpe (1995), p 72.
[526] *HE* V.6.

As for the precise ritual of foot washing, there is evidence that Germanus exercised this ministry himself:

> Hospitalitatem peculiari observatione servavit; omnibus enim sine ulla exceptione personae domum praebuit et convivium ieiunus pastor exhibuit. Pedes omnibus manibus suis lavit, dominicae institutionis minister et custos.
>
> He was especially punctilious in hospitality. His house was open to all without exception and he entertained them at his table without breaking his own fast. He washed the feet of all *his guests* with his own hands, following the example of the Lord whose servant he was.[527] [emphasis added]

The whole of chapter five of his *vita* is cited above, to explain why the translator felt moved to insert the words "his guests" in the second sentence. This alteration places Germanus' ministry of foot washing exclusively in the context of a domestic ritual of hospitality, but the original text does not. Constantius gives no indication that he knew Germanus personally, and of course came from a different city in Gaul, but he clearly knew of the missionary bishop's attachment to a ministry of foot washing.

It might be objected that Celtic Christian texts do not explicitly mention Ambrose by name as a precedent for any of their liturgical practices, but little can be inferred from such a silence. Four of the five early baptismal liturgies from northern Europe cited throughout this thesis make no reference to Ambrose as their authority, but which are unarguably influenced by his striking conceptions about the ritual.[528]

9.7 Cosmological aspects of Germanus' mission

As this thesis has demonstrated with regard to his exorcism of the sea (chapter 6), research into the specific topic of nature-based devotional activity in Britain has found precedent in the account of Germanus' missionary trip to Britain. There are further

[527] *Vita Germani* ch. 5 (original p 253; translation p 81).
[528] The Bobbio Missal mentions Ambrose in the *memento*; Hen & Meens (2004), p 3.

rituals and interventions involving the natural world in the *vita Germani* which merit future research in this context, including:

- Constructing a 'field church' out of branches as a form of sacred grove for baptism and possibly peace negotiations in advance of the Alleluia victory.

- Echoing the 'Alleluia' battle cry with the aid of the surrounding mountains to beat a hostile army of Picts and Saxons.[529]

- 'Crucifying' his body as a penitential exercise, a possible precedent for the *crossfigell* posture.[530]

Some of these appear to have a liturgical basis, particularly the anointing of the sea during a storm. On a related note is Constantius' description of the aftermath of the Alleluia victory, when the enemy forces are killed in a river that they seemingly had no difficulty in crossing beforehand:

> Plures etiam timore praecipites flumen, quod sensim venientes transierant, devoravit
>
> Many threw themselves into the river which they had just crossed at their ease, and were drowned in it.[531]

Here the dangers of natural water are juxtaposed with its salvific powers when blessed in baptismal ritual, the precise agency that appears to be the purpose of Celtic bathing and exorcistic incidents. The baptism that Germanus performed was certainly outdoors and presumably also took place in this or another river. The notion that there might be

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[529] *Vita Germani* ch. 17.

[530] *Vita Germani* ch. 3: *Iam vero enarri non potest, qua hostilitate vim sibi ipse consciverit, quas cruces quaeve supplicia corporis sui persecutor induerit*. 'But no words can describe the fierceness with which he did violence to himself and the crucifixions and penances with which he persecuted his own body.' (original p 252; translation p 80). By way of contrast Benedict of Nursia's mortification, such as rolling naked in nettles, is not described in such terms (*De vita et miraculis venerabilis Benedicti* II.2).

[531] *Vita Germani* ch. 18 (original p 265; translation p 90).

something particularly meaningful about the British context of these great set-piece landscape interactions is further supported by examining the rest of St Germanus' *vita*. Although it contains several scenes set in the outdoors of mainland Europe, there is no parallel to be found of his miracles in the seas, mountains and groves of Britain. At one point Constantius describes how the bishop was ascending a mountain pass when they were blocked a rocky gorge with treacherous whirlpools in the water.[532] Germanus responds by offering to take the pack of an elderly fellow traveller and carry it over the stream for him, the noteworthy point of this anecdote being that the bishop did not disclose his illustrious status to his fellow travellers. There is no suggestion of any miracle operating on the water, and this despite many healing miracles being ascribed to Germanus during his ministry within Gaul.

It is difficult not to conclude that Germanus' mission to Britain spilled out across the landscape in Constantius' account, demonstrating how ritual could tame the elements and render them useful to the service of those who followed the Christian God. As has been argued, at least one significant ritual action of Germanus, his anointment of the sea as an exorcistic action, might have been shaped by Ambrosian baptismal ritual. Detailed study of this point appears to demonstrate that this connection has further contextual support.

Ambrose further talks about the relationship between baptism and the state of the sea, providing a precise narrative frame that might well lie behind Germanus' dramatic intervention during the storm, and from there to the water-based rituals of the northern British missionaries. Acknowledging that a Christian continues to live in a world marked by storms and waves, Ambrose explains that God does not remove us from the world in the same way that he does not remove fish from the sea. However we become

[532] *Vita Germani* ch. 31.

more at ease in the world in the same way that fish do not drown in the sea, in a passage that begins with an imprecise citation from Genesis 1:11, 20:

> Legimus quidem: *Producat terra ex se fructum germinantem*. Similiter et de aquis legisti: *Producant aquae animantia, et nata sunt animantia*... Imitare illum piscem qui minorem quidem adeptus est gratiam, tamen debet tibi esse miraculo. In mari est et super undas est, in mari est et super fluctus natat. In mari tempestas furit, stridunt procellae, sed piscis natat, non demergitur quia natare consueuit. Ergo et tibi saeculum hoc mare est. Habet diuersos fluctus, undas graues, saeuas tempestates. Et tu esto piscis ut saeculi te unda non mergat.
>
> Certainly, we read, *Let the earth bring forth from herself fruit that springs up*. Likewise also thou hast read of the waters, *Let the waters bring forth living creatures*, and living creatures were born... Imitate the fish, which, though it has obtained less grace, yet should fill thee with wonder. It is in the sea, and above the waves; it is in the sea, and swims over the billows. In the sea the storm rages, the winds howl; but the fish swims, it does not sink, because it is wont to swim. Therefore this world is a sea to thee also. It has divers billows, heavy waves, fierce storms. And do thou be a fish, that the wave of the world sink thee not.[533]

As a theological precedent for the nature rituals of the early church in Britain as examined in this thesis, it is difficult to think of a closer match: the destructive natural forces of the world are rendered harmless to Christians, who understand and accept their rightful place in the environment through the sacrament of baptism. Brooks has highlighted other patristic texts that make a similar point, most notably Augustine, but only in Ambrose is this theology expressed in sacramental terms.[534]

It can therefore be concluded here that the records of ritual action directed at natural water across northern Britain express a myriad of liturgical and theological formulae whose source can ultimately be traced back to Ambrose, rituals directed at the landscape and people in a fragmentation of the originally cohesive and theologically connected whole. It would appear that baptismal liturgy focused on the font was repurposed as a powerful spiritual energy capable of cleansing the landscape, while the

[533] *De sacramentis* 3.1.3 (original p 23-4; translation p 97).
[534] Brooks (2016), p 208-9.

baptismal liturgy focused on foot washing, or the lower half of the body at least, realised its full potential as the primary agent to cleanse the human body of sin.

9.8 Foot washing: an anti-Pelagian ritual

The sparse details of Prosper of Aquitaine's account and Constantius' much longer *vita* agree on one important point: the mission of Germanus to Britain was designed to stamp out Pelagian heresy. This section considers whether this is a context in which to understand the Gallic bishop's most eye-catching and theologically rich engagements with the natural world. As introduced in chapter 4, such engagements are best understood in numerous British contexts as a missionary tactic designed to counter popular opposition to Christianity, public acts designed to refute deeply held cultural and spiritual attitudes. The notion that they and hence later Celtic ritual interactions with the natural world were also (or otherwise) designed to redeem the landscape from a mostly negative Pelagian sensibility towards nature has not yet been explored in this thesis.

There are two further reasons why an anti-Pelagian campaign might have come equipped with Ambrosian theology and ritual, both of which relate to foot-washing. The first is that one of the main devices employed in patristic argument against Pelagianism turns out to be foot washing, on the basis of its salvific function against original sin. A second reason is that foot washing was universally regarded as a lesson in humility.

Starting with the relatively simple issue of humility, it is difficult to know with any degree of certainty what an inculturated form of Pelagian Christianity might have looked like. When Constantius describes Germanus' confrontation with the Pelagian party of British bishops, they are described as *conspicui divitiis, veste fulgentes*

('flaunting their wealth, in dazzling robes').[535] This might seem implausibly ostentatious for a theology so focused on asceticism, but it is one of very few insights into the culture of Pelagianism when presented as a formally organised church hierarchy. And from another perspective, such connotations of arrogance accord with Augustine of Hippo's own direct challenge to the Pelagians that they needed a lesson in humility, for which he employs the ritual of foot washing, as described next.

It is the dispute over original sin which really places the *pedilavium* at the centre stage of 5th century Christian theological debate. The Pelagian position was to deny inherited guilt from Adam, accepting baptism only as a means of washing away one's personal sins. Pelagian writers also greatly admired Ambrose, and as Peter Brown has pointed out were notably reluctant to criticise Ambrosian theology even when it was cited against them.[536] This therefore equipped Augustine with an extremely powerful weapon with which to attack the Pelagians: their much revered Ambrose not only believed that sin was inherited from Adam, but even developed a foot-washing ritual to remove it. This dispute about original sin therefore had the unexpected effect of placing foot-washing at the centre of one of early Christianity's most important theological disputes. As Wills writes:

> Augustine proved that Ambrose believed in original sin. He was even willing to use the postbaptismal washing of the feet to cancel the effect of the serpent's bite on Adam's foot. Though Augustine himself did not use that rite, he said that it proved Ambrose's belief in original sin.[537]

Augustine was himself baptised by Ambrose, and thus both experienced in practice and later had cause to cite Ambrose's foot washing theology, but he did not include it in his own baptismal administration, preferring to reserve it as a separate liturgy. In his

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[535] *Vita Germani* ch. 14 (original p 261; translation p 87).
[536] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000), p 388.
[537] Wills (2012), p 170-1, citing Augustine: *Contra Julianum, Opus Imperfectum* 1.71.

Epistula 55 to Januarius of the year 400, Augustine also emphasised the other point Ambrose makes about foot washing, that it was a sign of humility.[538] Wills cites this same letter for further evidence of his understanding of the placement of a foot washing ceremony in relation to Easter, a letter in which Augustine talks about a divergence of opinion and custom over the ritual and suggests a range of suitable occasions for performing it, including Lent, Easter Sunday (the eighth day) and later in the Easter season.[539] Augustine also says that *multi*, 'many', in the church have chosen to keep foot washing apart from Easter, lest it be considered part of baptism itself, and that some have rejected it entirely as a Christian custom. It should be noted that in this letter Augustine does not categorically rule out a close proximity of baptism and foot washing, perhaps in deference to Ambrose who had died three years previously, but he does not present it as a viable option either.[540] As Augustine's recontextualisation of the *pedilavium* within the wider Lent and Easter seasons indicates, he was concerned that Ambrose's innovation was sufficiently profound to destabilise the theological focus of the baptismal rite as centred on the font. The evidence of early British practice suggests that his anxieties were entirely justified.

Ferguson points out that excavations at the baptistery of the episcopal church in Hippo have revealed the existence of a small rectangular basin next to but separate from the font, measuring 24cm by 41 cm and 45cm deep, which he believes might have been used for foot washing.[541]

In summary, then, it can be seen that the ritual of foot washing gained particular prominence in 5th century Christianity in connection with baptism precisely because it

[538] Wills (2002), p 157.
[539] Augustine: *Epistulae* 55.18.33.
[540] *CSEL* 34:2 Augustine, *Epistulae* II (no. 31-123), p 207-8.
[541] Ferguson (2009), p 785.

was a direct refutation of Pelagianism, a refutation that Pelagians themselves would find difficult to answer.

The appearance of a nature-based foot washing ritual in the hagiographical material about Cuthbert, therefore, needs careful consideration in the light of all the significance that had accrued to this performance. When theological considerations are brought to bear on the historical material, it seems that not only is Pelagianism absent from the impulse behind certain Celtic rituals, it might even be the target of them. The spectre of Pelagianism as an inherent part of Celtic Christianity recedes ever further with this examination of the specific phenomenon of nature-based rituals, the cosmological foot washing of the sea creatures at Coldingham a lesson in penitence and humble service that finds its origins in the minds of Ambrose and Augustine. This discussion about baptism and related outdoor bathing practices is not simply one aspect of the disagreement between Ambrose and the Roman church as played out in a British context, but strikes at what historians have identified as the crux of the much more serious disagreement with Pelagian heretics: the nature of individual and inherited sin.

9.9 Humans and creation in Pelagian cosmology

The notion that the leaders of a religious movement such as Pelagianism gave themselves airs and graces, to use a modern expressions, is not without precedent as an ecclesiastical instinct. But is there any evidence that the Pelagian attitude towards nature had any sort of similar aloofness or disengagement? Surprisingly, it seems that there might be. The natural world is not a topic that greatly preoccupies Pelagius, or indeed many other of the urban theologians of European Late Antiquity, but he does give an interesting glimpse on his view of nature in an eschatological context, in a brief aside contained in his exegesis on Romans 8:20-21. The Vulgate biblical text is as follows:

> [20] vanitati enim creatura subiecta est non volens sed propter eum qui subiecit in spem [21] quia et ipsa creatura liberabitur a servitute corruptionis in libertatem gloriae filiorum Dei
>
> [20] for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, [21] in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Pelagius's comment is only a short one, but if it is indicative of any degree of consistent attitude towards the natural world, it is possible to all but rule out his influence on many of the nature rituals encountered in Britain. His brief exegesis implies that animals will be finally be liberated from their bondage to humans, rather than free to serve them:

> qu[on]ia[m] et ipsa creatura liberabitur a seruitute corruptionis in libertate gloriae filiorum dei. Iam non seruiet eis qui dei [in se] imaginem corruperunt.
>
> even creation will be set free from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. It shall no longer serve those who have corrupted the image of God [in themselves][542]

Paul Blowers summarises this anthropocentric interpretation as meaning that "non-human creation will simply be released from being an accessory, a slave to those who have, through disobedience, corrupted the image of God."[543] Pelagius' comment seems a long way from any chain of being that connects all creation, or from the exposition of cosmological salvation that Bede develops to justify Celtic expressions of human ritual engagement with nature. Pelagius does not even pursue this line of thinking with a theology celebrating uncorrupted creation as a contrast to human sinfulness, but instead posits what can best be described as a supranatural vision of humanity in his letter *To Demetrias*:

> Neque enim nudum illum, ac sine praesidio reliquit, nec diversis periculis velut exposuit infirmum. Sed quem inermem extrinsecus fecerat, melius intus armavit:

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[542] Pelagius: *Expositiones in epistolas Paulinas* 8.21; *Pelagius's Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St Paul Vol. 2*, ed. by J. Armitage Robinson, trans. by Alexander Souter, Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature: Texts and Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), IX, p 66; translation in *Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans* trans. by De Bruyn, T. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p 110. All parentheses are in the cited texts. The translation adds a cross reference to Genesis 1:26.

[543] Blowers (2012), p 221.

> ratione scilicet atque prudentia, ut per intellectum vigoremque mentis, quo caeteris praestabat animalibus, factorem omnium solus agnoseret: et inde serviret Deo, unde aliis dominabatur.[544]
>
> For he did not leave man naked and defenceless nor did he expose him in his weakness to a variety of dangers; but, having made him seen unarmed outwardly, he provided him with a better armament inside, that is, with reason and wisdom, so that by means of his intelligence and mental vigour, in which he surpassed the other animals, *man alone was able to recognize the maker of all things and to serve God by using those same faculties which enabled him to hold sway over the rest*.[545] [emphasis added]

In stark contrast to the many nature rituals cited in this research, where a holy figure folds all creation back towards God by exercising a sort of cosmological priesthood, Pelagius perceives animals and humans as belonging to entirely separate categories, unable to share in divine worship. Cuthbert's otters, Guthlac's swallows and Columbanus' squirrels would no doubt beg to differ.

A different attitude towards the Fall therefore explains Pelagius' rather detached view of humanity's place in the divinely ordered cosmos. As other scholars have noted, even within the specific context of early British attitudes towards nature, Augustine's exegesis on the cosmological implications of the Fall helped to shape attitudes regarding both salvation and the eschatological end time. As seen in chapter 3, Bede himself develops just such a theology in his prose *Vita sancti Cuthberti*, talking about the recovery of a lost dominion over nature. It is entirely dependent on a patristic model of the Fall, and could not be more anti-Pelagian in its theological conception. In his arguments defending this point in the face of Pelagian criticism, Ambrose's foot washing proved to be one of Augustine's most important theological constructs.

That Pelagius' texts were still circulating in Britain by the end of the conversion period can at least be demonstrated. Bede's commentary *On the Song of Songs* includes

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[544] *Pelagii ad Demeteriadem epistola* ch. 2, *PL* 30, col. 18.
[545] *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, ed. by B. R. Rees (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991), p 37.

discussion of *To Demetrias*, which Augustine and modern scholars alike attribute to Pelagius. Bede concludes that despite some excellent content it fails to promote the need for divine grace rather than free will.[546] Aldhelm however cites it without comment on its authorship.[547]

In summary, then, it seems that missionaries to Britain, from Germanus through the Celtic Christians all the way to Cuthbert and Guthlac are holding out an olive branch, as it were, towards the natural world. By way of contrast, the Christianity of Pelagius seems to be one that is consciously disconnected, the proponents marking themselves out as superior, imagining that they can achieve spiritual greatness entirely by themselves, and rejecting the idea that the Fall has fractured humanity's relationship with the natural world in favour of a narrative that humans rose above it through their superior abilities. Some of these might well be caricatures drawn up by their enemies, but that would merely reframe rather than diminish their significance: this is what nature rituals refute. What the mainstream Christian missionaries chose in order to counter Pelagianism was a very much embodied form of the faith, one which engaged the landscape in ritual from the moment Germanus set eyes on the British coast during a storm at sea. It also stretched to the human body, the humble foot taking central place in a mission of humble service and even, according to Ambrose's ambitious theology, baptismal redemption.

This research has already examined evidence that the pre-Christian people of Britain had a discernible aversion to bodies of natural water. It is relatively simple to imagine how an opportunistic Pelagian missionary theology could elide its vision of humanity set apart from the rest of creation with such a negative view of the environment,

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[546] *Ibid.* p 33.
[547] *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, ed. by Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1979) p 196, n. 26.

although there is not enough evidence to speculate on the shapes such a syncretic Christianity might have taken. Whereas Pelagian leaders could have chosen this path of least resistance, the missionary work examined in this research appears to have confronted inhibitions and superstitions about nature directly. The campaign to exorcise and thus render natural water harmless, and eventually useful, to humans emerges as a persistent theme in the conversion era of northern Britain, and must have had a missionary impetus.

In conclusion it seems that an intense, two-way interaction with the landscape might have taken on particular urgency as a refutation of Pelagian attitudes towards the natural world. Even though we know little about the detail of such Pelagian attitudes, and even less about their implications for lived and embodied Christian culture, in Britain at least it is argued that they were refuted by a missionary campaign to reconcile humans to the rest of creation. Such a conclusion brings this research back to one of the initial points of investigation, the way in which Bede's theological formula explains nature interactions as a restoration of the first creation. This study proceeded to water interactions and ultimately discerned the shapes of baptismal exorcism and foot washing, which were instruments of precisely this cosmological restoration that Bede posited. The notion that there was a coherent strategy behind the wide array of interventions in the landscape seems increasingly secure the more evidence is examined.

CHAPTER 10

Conclusions: the conversion of the British landscape and its afterlife

Surveying the scene presented by the research into baptism and bathing outlined above presents something of a novel spectacle in the field of Celtic and early Anglo-Saxon studies. As the dust settles from the collapse of certain assumptions that have ring-fenced this era, a numinous landscape comes into view that is mapped not by a lingering sense of Paganism or the supposed delineations of Pelagianism but instead contoured by the lines and shapes of mainstream patristic theology, rendered unfamiliar by the physical topography and decorated bodies it was required to wrap itself around.

It might seem too much to consider that Ambrose's views on foot washing as restoration of prelapsarian innocence and the cross-like sacrifice of baptismal immersion were found two centuries later eddying in the relative backwater of Britain. These views were steadily moderated by Roman practice, as Augustine's theology and practice came to dominate western Europe. Yet something had placed baptismal practice in Celtic Christianity at some distance from catholic practice. It would not be without precedent in church history for an early enthusiasm for foot washing to have supplanted the baptismal ritual of immersion. Geoffrey Wainwright concludes that recent research into the significance of foot washing in John's Gospel

> suggests that among some early Johannine communities it was not baptism at all but a foot washing ceremony that constituted the "rite" of Christian initiation, and hence the possibility emerges that many of the ceremonies that came to be attached to baptism as additional or supplementary rites (e.g., handlaying, anointing, foot washing) once constituted complete rites of initiation, perhaps even without the water bath, in some early communities.[548]

[548] *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. by Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p 37, citing in particular Connell, Martin F. '*Nisi Pedes*, Except for the Feet: Footwashing in the Community of John's Gospel,' *Worship* 70 (1996), p 20-30; also Spinks (2006), p 12.

Certainly the spiritual agency that Ambrose attributes to foot washing as a means of removing inherited sin would be capable of destabilising baptismal theology as centred on the font. It might well be that this helped to prepare the ground for what happened in Britain, downgrading the role of immersion to a lesser washing of feet and hands, which would have found particularly powerful resonance with a people demonstrably fearful of natural water. When Columba exorcises the demon-infested well in Pictland, perhaps Adomnán had good reason to tactfully repurpose its new function as a washbasin that only the saint himself used, sidestepping the fact that any baptism following Columba's ritual pattern would have been a distinctly token form of ablution:

> Ille uero inprimís eleuata manu sancta cum inuocatione Christi nominis manus lauat et pedes.
>
> But he, first raising his holy hand in invocation of the name of Christ, washed his hands and feet[549]

The same lesser immersion can be seen too in the waist-high (and partly clothed) Ionan bathing rituals. Embodied matters such as bathing etiquette, attire and notions of publicly acceptable behaviour run deep in cultural identity, as the millennium-long battle over dress codes in the thermal waters at Bath demonstrates, and as current European discussion about certain types of Islamic dress continues to demonstrate in the 21st century.

The research presented here has examined the multi-faceted topic of ritual interaction with the natural world from as many angles as the limited evidence permits. It is no excuse to blame the lack of direct textual or material evidence for any gaps in the arguments, but these gaps do require a high degree of careful contextualisation of all available strand of evidence in order to interpret the findings. The broad narrative that can be determined from the research presented above is that the pre-Christian spiritual

[549] *Vita Columbae* II.11, p 108-9.

culture of Britain had a notable anxiety about some aspects of the created world, specifically identified in this project as the baneful spirits, creatures and properties lurking in natural bodies of water. The Pelagian bishops who apparently took temporary control of British Christianity worked with this inhibition, seeing in it a justification of their spiritual leader's own theology that there was not and had never been a harmonious state of a peaceful and united creation that would be restored to humanity at the end of time. From Rome and Milan came a robust missionary response: the natural world had been corrupted from its created state precisely because of the Fall and holy men and women were able to offer a glimpse of its restoration, effected through the sacramental theology of the church. The demons in the landscape, both pagan and Pelagian, were exorcised as the people themselves were converted.

10.1 The conversion of the landscape

With regard to the specific topic of a devotional interaction with nature it is easy to see that there were common concerns expressed across Britain on some issues, such as the need for saints to demonstrate that their religion would help to make nature more benign – or indeed 'useful'. It would seem that this notion of a utilitarian religion is remarkably close to the surface in descriptions of pagan explorations of the benefits and disadvantages of their impending new faith: this is the word that Gildas uses to describe the converted landscape, *olim exitiabiles, nunc vero humanis usibus utiles*, 'once so deadly, now so useful for human needs', the citation presented at the start of this research.[550]

Despite arising from a later context in a different part of Britain, this same notion of 'usefulness' is at the heart of criticism levelled initially at Christianity and then at paganism by the author of the Whitby *VGM* as he describes the rapid conversion of king

[550] Gildas: *De excidio* 4.2-3.

Edwin's people. It would seem that this is no mere verbal coincidence either, since the same word appears again in a conversion context when Bede describes the high priest Coifi's sudden rejection of his own religion as *nihil utilitatis*.[551] Three different authors living perhaps 150 years apart, from different regions of Britain with a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, all gravitate towards the same overall narrative description of the most pressing concern of potential converts: they wanted a religion that was demonstrably useful. More specifically still, for the first two of these authors this meant a realignment of the natural world to remove any obstacles to human expediency, the rivers and mountains of Gildas and the unpropitious crow of the Whitby *VGM*. Moral lessons from nature can also be detected in the third of these incidents, Bede's account of the conversion of king Edwin's people, in the evocative shape of a sparrow lost in the tribal hall.

This notion of expediency can also be seen so close to the surface of numerous other hagiographical interactions with the natural world, from Wilfrid and the providential rainfall at the conversion of Sussex to the numerous incidents in which the powers of nature are ameliorated, as in the case of stormy seas and animals becoming helpful. In Adomnán's *Life of St Columba*, the ability to interact with and manipulate the landscape, wildlife and weather receives greater prominence than the missionary's campaign to convert people.

When it comes to natural bodies of water, it would appear that the narrative of landscape conversion is most acutely realised in northern Britain, particularly among the Pictish cultures. This too might represent the only well-attested evidence of an anxiety that affected the transition to Christianity over a wider area. We do not know enough about the conversion of native Britons during and immediately after the period

[551] *HE* II.13.

of Roman rule to know for certain about such a detailed aspect of the inculturation of Christianity, although evidence about the existence of lead fonts cited in chapter 8 suggests the possibility can be considered. It does at least seem clear that the description of Cuthbert's interactions with natural water and his missionary journeys written by the anonymous monk of Lindisfarne bear traces of this same inhibition about natural water that finds its most intense expression in Pictland.

The theme of a reconciliation between humans and the natural world is a dominant one that permeates all levels of discourse in the early church in Britain. Bede's exegetical writings about the latent 'first creation' in nature, the missionaries' sermons on Genesis 1:26-9, and Cuthbert wading into the sea to pray all embodied the same impulse to articulate Christianity in terms that would convince and appeal to people across all levels in society. The British landscape does appear from the records of the earliest medieval period to be an unusually anthropomorphic one, the animals and elements alive with spiritual energy and enthusiastically inclined to participate in a saint's acts and rituals of devotion.

What does emerge as an over-riding theme from the evidence presented above is that the missionaries who encountered such barriers to the establishment of Christianity forged their tactical responses out of the material of catholic Christian practice and teaching. Patristic theology concerning the effects of the Fall was used to explain the fractious relationship between humans and their environment. Elements of the baptismal liturgy, a ritual of extensive cosmological reach, were employed to counter the fears of the laity. Although somewhat beyond the remit of this research, it is arguably the case that the earliest church and the teachings of Christ alike originally urged such an inclusivity of the natural world within the divine drama, an engagement that has been steadily erased from practice and theology alike. Certainly it seems that modern divisions in Christianity can not be employed to delineate the shape of mission in early

medieval Britain: an evangelical and missionary form of Christianity was at the same time one that was profoundly sacramental and liturgical in its approach to potential converts. Rather than opting for a syncretism that compromised on Christian doctrine and practice to win easy converts, it seems that the missionaries drew deep on their own resources to find answers to some urgent questions, questions that had not been fully rehearsed during the conversion of people educated in the imperial civilisations of mainland Europe. Certainly the findings of this research give more weight to the adaptability of Christianity to a new culture, as seen in many other regions of the world up to and including the missionaries in Africa in the 19th century.

10.2 Ethnicity, Celtic Christianity and the cosmos

In the introduction to this thesis, a note was made about the tendency by many scholars to approach early medieval Britain with an interpretative framework constructed around notions of ethnic identity, often elided imprecisely with notions of cultural and religious identity, particularly by means of the term Celtic. This is an instinct that runs deep, discernible in historians from Bede onwards to see something special about the way in which religion helps to define the tribal story.

Nicholas Higham was cited in caution against such a tendency, arguing that these identities are considerably more fluid than many scholars allow. The question therefore arises as to whether such fluidity can be seen in the conclusions drawn about the ritual interactions conducted in and with the natural environment in this research, particularly considering that this study is a detailed examination of a specific topic, allowing a focused evaluation of its expression across different regions and tribes. This research reveals that there was a set of broad missionary concerns that was shared by Christian writers from a very wide range of backgrounds throughout the period under study. The same concern with orchestrating a Christian harmony with the natural world can be seen

in the dramatic exorcism of Germanus, through the conversion narrative of Gildas and on to the proliferation of hagiographies written at the end of the 7th and start of the 8th centuries. Bede's theological formula concerning the effect a holy person can have on creation was a response to an innovative narrative about nature that emerged in written form at the monastery of Lindisfarne. Any attempt to define Celtic Christianity in terms of its unique affection for nature would need to account not only for Bede's theological justification for such a relationship but also its amplification in the writings of Felix about Guthlac in the Fens.

The natural world is too large an arena for religious activity and thought to be constrained to any single ethnic identity. A culture of Christianity that truly appreciates the cosmological scale of its reach by necessity has to be inclusive of all other creatures, irrespective not only of ethnic divisions but also the divisions between every other aspect of creation, including animate and inanimate creatures. A Christian theology that embraces the full cosmological reach of a creator God incarnated and operating within His creation is one that will reconcile people to place.

It is something of a contrast in this context to read how Bede presents Cuthbert's deathbed confession of faith, supposedly urging his followers to have nothing to do with those *scismaticorum*, schismatics, who continued to follow the Celtic date for Easter.[552] For a man whose ministry was exercised towards the entirety of the cosmos, crossing boundaries between species and between the animate and inanimate worlds, it is striking that he was supposedly unable to maintain relationships across this temporary theological dispute.

Perhaps more significant still is the conclusion of the search into the origins of intense Christian attachment to the landscape, a trajectory that can be traced back to Germanus,

[552] *VCP*, ch. 39.

and through him to the Christian community of northern Europe more generally. Long before Cuthbert, Columba, and even before Patrick himself, this Gallic missionary was busy reconciling the waves, hills and groves of Britain to his decidedly catholic vision of the church. The legacy of hagiographical material by Sulpicius Severus and liturgical tradition from Ambrose and Milan had a deep and long-lasting effect on the development of Christianity in Britain, testament to the interconnected origins of the Christian church even during a period when contact was intermittent.

10.3 Memories in the landscape: the legacy

The notion of a benign, nature-loving paganism seems impossible to locate in the primary evidence about natural water features. Perhaps living creatures, which are not included in Gildas' account of environmental conversion, offer a promising parallel area for future research, and evidence gathered so far suggests a rather more positive role for animals, trees and groves in both pagan and Christian conceptions of the natural world and its potential for reconfiguration by humans. But for rivers and other bodies of water, 'deadly' seems an entirely warranted description. On this point, it is interesting that correspondence with several members of the Neo-Pagan movement in Britain has not identified any significant attempts to promote a discipline of sacred bathing as an authentic modern expression of pagan sensibility.[553]

It is just possible – but only just – to speculate whether paganism had a sense of the spiritual so deeply connected to the material that the inanimate world of mountains, hills and rivers signified death, and the animate world signified life, the wooden coffins and the cave-like stone crypts of the early British Christians a shocking message to the

[553] Personal communication with Philip Carr-Gomm, leader of the The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, and Orkney-based celebrant Helen Woodsford-Dean.

converts that the old divisions had been broken down by a resurrected God, a topic for exploration elsewhere.

The ritual engagement with nature through liturgical performance by holy men and women demonstrates just how this transition from *exitiabiles* to *utiles* ('useful') was effected. It is difficult not to conclude that the common folk wanted a religion that promised them material benefits from their environment. This is a broad narrative of conversion that Gildas paints, a deep-rooted cultural realignment of a seismic rather than a superficial level. The landscape is arguably the most enduring of all the many cultural repositories that are capable of bearing and perpetuating meaning and memory.[554]

There was instead a two-stage conversion strategy: a tactical, locally negotiated, creative, devolved, adaptive mission to imprint the Christian message on the people and the land alike. This took place in Anglo-Saxon regions just as much as 'Celtic' ones, even clearly discernible in Bede's seemingly Rome-heavy history and hagiography. The second stage of conversion was the institutionalisation of the church, and the ultimate removal of the artefacts of the first conversion. Such a mopping up exercise can surely be seen in the Anglo-Saxon reformation, the 10th century invective against excessive spiritual engagement with the landscape recorded by the homilist Ælfric of Eynsham (d. *c*. 1010) and archbishop Wulfstan of York (d. 1023) around the year 1000.[555] As has been seen, historians follow Gougaud in perceiving a long-lasting Celtic culture of devotional bathing, but the later hagiographic records of saintly interactions with water quietly lose the emphasis on exorcism and interaction with the water seen so acutely in earlier times.

[554] Walsham (2011), p 6-7 summarises scholarship on the richness of the landscape as a repository for collective memories.
[555] Blair (2005) p 481.

It should also come as no surprise that religion left a considerable imprint on the bodies of pagans, converts and Christians just as it did the landscapes in which they lived. Cultural attitudes towards the human body are among the most deep-seated of all attitudes and presuppositions, as seen in the unreflective assumption of modern scholars that their own embarrassments and inhibitions about nakedness can be worked back into the historical record. It could be argued that any missionary confronted by such superstitions could simply have refuted them by stripping off and wading into the water and demanding that others do the same. Rather the evidence points to a more persuasive missionary theology that worked with rather than against such deeply held beliefs. The widespread evidence that the early saints put so much time and energy into exorcising the seas and rivers of Britain demonstrates that they took these bodily inhibitions as seriously as their converts.

Pelagians might well have harnessed the underlying negative attitude towards nature, taking an easy option by agreeing with such pre-Christian cultural and intellectual attitudes that considered the environment capricious to the point of hostility. Remove the Fall, as Pelagius did, and there is no lost paradise to regain. The redemption of this landscape that Gildas describes did not happen by chance, nor did it happen overnight. Missionaries to Britain from all sides faced an unfamiliar set of challenges. This was unchartered territory for Christianity missionary theology forged in Hellenistic intellectual milieu, a territory already partly claimed by a faction of opportunistic Pelagian bishops ready to accept existing narratives of a landscape freighted with spiritual danger, without any eschatological hope of reconciliation.

The missionaries needed to outflank such narratives of a baneful natural world, but Pelagius was foremost in Germanus' mind when he forged his missionary strategy, aided by Europe's leading theologians. The debate was still red hot in the year of his

departure for Britain, Augustine of Hippo putting his last remaining energy into rescuing a promise of Eden from Pelagian conceit.

Celtic Christianity is understood here as a missionary church, categorising it not in terms of ethnic division but in terms of a mission without discrimination to every part of the island of Britain. If by oil and the cross Germanus did indeed turn the North Sea into one vast baptismal font, every creature on the island emerged into a Christian faith tailored to fit.

Devotional bathing incidents in the lives of saints from Britain, Ireland and Europe

Saint	Date	Place	Stated purpose/context	Activity while immersed	Clothing	Depth of immersion	Recorded in	Date of record
Late Antique								
Evagrius Ponticus	382	Nitria, Egypt	mortification	praying (in Coptic *Life*)	naked	-	Palladius: *Lausiac History* and *Coptic Life*	near contemporary
Monks in Egeria's account	381-4	Jordan	washing	-	-	-	Egeria: *Peregrinatio ad loca sancta*	contemporary
Mary of Egypt	d. *c* . 421	Jordan	penitential	-	-	washing face and hands	Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem: *Life*	630s
Gregorius the Anchorite	?6th century	Jordan	-	-	?naked	-	John Moschus: *Pratum spirituale* (*Vitae Patrum* X)	early 7th century
Ionan monastic foundations								
Columba	d. 597	Iona	ascetic	vigil/praying	clothed	?waist deep, crucifix position	*A Poem in Praise of Columb Cille* *Middle Irish Life* *Beatha Coluimb Chille*	7th century *c* . 1160 1532
Monk in Columba's party	6th century	river Ness	repulsion of beast	swimming	clothed	swimming	Adomnán: *Vita Columbae*	*c* . 700
Cuthbert in *VCA*	d. 687	Coldingham	night vigil	-	loincloth	waist deep, crucifix position	Anonymous: *Vita sancti Cuthberti*	c. 700 Lindisfarne
Dryhthelm	8th century	Old Melrose	mortification/chastisement	reciting prayers and psalms	?clothed	waist or neck	Bede: *Historia ecclesiastica*	early 8th century
Anglo-Saxon								
Cuthbert in *VCP* and *VCM*	d. 687	Coldingham	night vigil	singing	-	neck	Bede: *VCP* and *VCM*	8th century
Wilfrid	d. 709/710	Ripon	purification/rebirth	-	?naked	"his body"	Eddius Stephanus: *Vita sancti Wilfridi*	8th century
Chad	d. 672	Lichfield	-	prayer	?naked	-	John Leland: *Itinerary*	16th century
Aldhelm	d. 709	England	mortification	reciting 'entire psalter'	-	shoulders	William of Malmesbury: *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*	12th century
Later Celtic saints								
Beino and companions	d. 640	river Severn	washing/leisure		naked	full/swimming	*Buchedd Beuno*	12th century
Kentigern	d. 614	Glasgow	night vigil	reciting psalms	naked	"immerse himself"	Jocelyn of Furness: *Vita Kentigerni*	*c.* 1185
Cadroe	d. *c* . 978	Scotland/Germany	-	reciting 15 psalms	naked	-	*Vita Kadroe*	contemporary
Illtud	6th century	Llantwit Major	cold-water washing	Lord's Prayer 3 times	-	-	*Vita sancti Iltuti*	*c.* 1140
Gildas	d. 570	Britain	-	Lord's Prayer 3 times	-	-	*Vita Gildae*	*c.* 1130-50
Cungar	6th century	Congresbury, Bristol	-	Lord's Prayer 3 times	-	-	*Vita Cungari*	12th century
Gwynllyw	d. 500/523	Newport, S Wales	reduce libido	-	naked	-	*Vita sancti Gundleii*	*c* . 1120
Gwladys	d. 500/523	Newport, S Wales	reduce libido	-	naked	-	*Vita sancti Gundleii*	*c* . 1120
David	d. *c* . 589	Llantwit Major	reduce libido	-	-	-	Ricemarch: *Vita sancti David*	11th century
Brynach	6th century	Milford Haven/Nevern	healing/mortification	-	?naked	-	*Vita sancti Bernaci*	12th century
Dogmael	6th century	Wales	reduce libido	-	-	-	Gerald of Wales: *Gemma Ecclesiae*	13th century
Gurthiern	6th century	river Tamar	doing penance	praying after beside river	-	-	*Vita S. Gurthierni*	early 12th century
Later Anglo-Saxon saints								
Ethelfleda	*c* . 1000	Romsey, Hants	night vigil	praying	naked	-	*Nova Legenda Anglie* I	14th/15th centuries
Godric	12th century	Finchale priory	-	-	naked	-	*Nova Legenda Anglie* I	14th/15th centuries
Ailred	d. 1167	Rievaulx	mortification	-	-	whole body	autobiographical *Regula inclusarum*	contemporary

Devotional bathing incidents in the lives of saints from Britain, Ireland and Europe (continued)								
Saint	**Date**	**Place**	**Stated purpose/context**	**Activity while immersed**	**Clothing**	**Depth of immersion**	**Recorded in**	**Date of record**
Early medieval Ireland								
Patrick	5th century	Ireland	?mortification	-	-	-	Attested or alluded to in seven sources, the earliest in Muirchu, *Life of St Patrick*	7th century
Kevin of Glendalough	d. 618	Glendalough	mortification	prayer for one hour	naked	-	*vita Coemgeni*	late medieval
Brigit and companion	d. 525	Ireland	-	praying and shedding tears	-	-	First published by Colgan as the *Third Life* of St Brigit, but incorporating older material	17th century
St Ciaran of Saigir	d. *c.* 530	Ireland	miraculous water heating	-	-	-	*vita Ciarani* (*VSH* I)	15th century
Comgall	d. 602	Bangor	miraculous water heating	-	-	-	*vita Comgalli*	11th century
St Fechin of Fore	d. 665	Fore, Co. Westmeath	miraculous water heating	praying	-	-	Irish Life of St Fechin	7th century
St Fursa	d. 650	Co. Galway	-	reciting psalms	-	-	Cuimmin's Poem on the saints of Ireland	12th century
Ultan	d. *c* . 657	Co. Meath	-	-	-	-	Cuimmin's Poem on the saints of Ireland	12th century
Findcha of Brigobann	d. *c* . 655	Co. Cork	-	-	-	-	*Betha Fhinnchua Brí Gobhhann* in the *Book of Lismore*	15th century
Cuannatheus	7th century	-	-	reciting the whole psalter	-	-	*Vita Cuannae sive Cuannachei*, published Colgan	17th century
Monenna	d. *c* . 517	Co. Down/Burton on Trent	-	-	naked	up to breasts or shoulders	Conchubranus: *vita S Monennae; Nova Legenda Anglie* II	10th/11th century
Erc Nascai	?	Co. Down	-	praying with a rope around neck	-	-	*Félire Oengusso*	9th century
Scothine	6th century	Co. Kilkenny	reduce libido	singing psalms	-	-	*Félire Oengusso*	9th century
Conal	5th century	Co. Roscommon	-	reciting Lenten office	-	-	*Vita S. Attractae* , published Colgan	12th century or later
anonymous hermit	9th century	Ireland	washing away sins	-	-	-	*The Hermit's Song*	9th century
Molaise	d. 564	Ireland/Scotland	-	prayer for one hour	naked	-	*Vita sancti Lasriani seu Molaissi abbatis de Dam Inis*	14th century
Early medieval: continent								
Wandrille	7th century	Metz	-	reciting psalms	-	-	*Vita Wandregisili*	contemporary
Guenaël of Landevenec	6th century	France	penance	reciting penitential psalms	-	up to shoulders	*Vita S. Guenaili*	9th century
Later medieval: continent								
Bernard of Clairvaux	d. 1153	Clairvaux, France	reduce libido	-	-	up to neck	William of Saint-Thierry: *Vita Bernardi*	12th century
Nevolo of Faenza	d. 1280	Faenza, Italy	reduce libido	-	-	-	*Vita*	15th century
Peter Damian	d. 1072	Faenza, Italy	mortification	-	-	-	John of Lodi: *Vita Petri Damiani*	contemporary
Benedict of Nursia	d. 543	Italy	reduce libido	-	naked	-	Gregory the Great: *Dialogi*	*c.* 600
Christina Mirabilis	d. 1224	Belgium	-	praying	-	-	Thomas of Cantimpré: *vita*	contemporary

APPENDIX B

Conversion incidents in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*

J. T. Rosenthal has investigated all the conversion incidents described in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* to identify which, of any, include miracles. The nine examples that Rosenthal cites are listed in this appendix, along with a further 16 incidents that have been identified by an independent reading of the *Historia*. The total of 25 is in accord with Rosenthal's estimation that there are "approximately 24" such accounts.[556]

The following is a list based on a brief summary of each of the conversion incidents, with notes on salient points that connect to the main body of the report.

1. St Alban, *HE* I.7

In addition to Rosenthal's comments about the martyrdom of St Alban, it should be noted that this account does include some criticism of Christianity by the local, Roman judge, who angrily chastises Alban for protecting a priest:

> 'Quia rebellem' inquiens 'ac sacrilegum celare quam militibus reddere maluisti, ut contemtor diuum meritam blasfemiae suae poenam lueret, quaecumque illi debebantur supplicia tu soluere habes, si a cultu nostrae religionis discedere temtas.'
>
> [the judge] said, 'You have chosen to conceal a profane rebel rather than surrender him to my soldiers, to prevent him from paying a well-deserved penalty for his blasphemy in despising the gods; so you will have to take the punishment he as incurred if you attempt to forsake our worship and religion.'[557]

Later in the same chapter, Bede puts words into the judge's mouth that are clearly untenable as a genuine reflection of Roman Paganism, since they express Christian concepts:

> 'Si uis perennis uitae felicitate perfrui, diis magnis sacrificare ne differas.'

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[556] Rosenthal, J. T. 'Bede's Use of Miracles in "The Ecclesiastical History"', *Traditio* 31 (1975), p 328–35.
[557] *HE* I.7, p 30-1.

'If you wish to enjoy the happiness of everlasting life, you must sacrifice at once to the mighty gods.'

2. The conversion of Ethelbert of Kent, *HE* I.26

As Rosenthal writes, this account mentions miracles at the end as a final confirmation rather than a decisive agent: "at last the king, as well as the others, believed and was baptized, being attracted by the pure life of the saints and by their most precious promises, whose truth they confirmed by performing many miracles"

In addition to Rosenthal's note, at the conversion of king Ethelbert there is also a record of the king's negative view of Christianity:

> Cauerat enim ne in aliquam domum ad se introirent, uetere usus augurio, ne superuentu suo, siquid maleficae artis habuissent, eum superando deciperent.
>
> He took care that they should not meet in any building, for he held the traditional superstition that, if they practised any magic art, they might deceive him and get the better of him as soon as he entered.[558]

3. The conversion of Edwin, *HE* II.12-13

This is described and cited in detail in the main thesis. King Edwin himself had celestial visions to aid his conversion, but allowed a free discussion in his council.

4. Paulinus, *HE* II.14, 16, 17

As Rosenthal notes, Paulinus is described as simply catechizing and baptising (II.14) among the people of Bernicia and Deira following king Edwin's conversion, and simply 'preaches' the Gospel in the kingdom of Lindsey (II.16, 17).

5. King Eorpwold, *HE* II.15

King Edwin 'persuaded' Eorpwold of the East Saxons to accept Christianity. This also records that Eorpwold's father had not been successfully converted: he set up two altars

[558] *HE* I.25, p 74-5.

in one temple, one for Christian worship the other to offer sacrifices to the 'gods whom he had previously served'. In the same chapter bishop Felix of Burgundy preaches 'the word of life to this nation of the Angles'.

6. Aidan at Lindisfarne, *HE* III.3, 5

Instruction and ministry are mentioned repeatedly during Aidan's establishment of the missionary centre at Lindisfarne, citing four references to 'preaching the word of faith with great devotion... administering the grace of baptism to those who believed... people flocked together with joy to hear the word... monks who came to preach'. Also in III.5 when he encountered unbelievers he would 'invite them to accept the mystery of the faith'.

7. Fursey, *HE* III.19

Fursey converted the East Saxons with his "virtues and the persuasiveness of his teaching".

8. Oswald's people, *HE* III.2

Miracles only occur for Oswald's people *after* their baptism.

9. Wilfrid and the South Saxons, *HE* IV.13

The miracle of the end of drought for the South Saxons thanks to Wilfrid occurs just after their baptism, and the teaching of fishing techniques also occurs as a *beneficio* 'good turn' rather than a miracle. This incident is examined in the main thesis.

Building on the above list compiled by Rosenthal, it is interesting to investigate all the other conversion accounts that appear in the *Historia ecclesiastica*. It would have been useful to read Rosenthal's own list to perform this exercise because there are issues over

the precise definition of what counts as a conversion story. Even so, the following can be added:

10. Lucius, *HE* II.4

A 'king of Britain' writes to pope Eleutherius and asks that he might be made a Christian by the pope's 'rescript' (*mandatum*).

11. Germanus, *HE* I.18

Although it is unclear whether they are Pelagian heretics or non-Christians, Bede recounts that *innumera hominum... ad Dominum turba conuersa est* ('a countless number of men turned to the Lord') when Germanus visited the shrine of St Alban. Although Bede's account of Germanus' mission to Britain is closely based on the *Vita Germani* by Constantius of Lyon, written *c.* 475-80, the earlier text does not include this detail.

12. King Sæberht, *HE* II.3

Mellitus goes to preach to king Sæberht of the East Saxons, and as a result 'this race had accepted the word of truth through the preaching of Mellitus'.

13. King Sæberht's sons, *HE* II.5

An unsuccessful attempt at conversion occurs when Mellitus tries to persuade the sons of Sæberht to be baptised. They refuse, saying they have no need of it, but even so wish to eat 'the white bread which you used to give to our father'. Mellitus is then expelled, an incident examined in the main body of the thesis.

14. King Sæberht's son Eadbald, HE *II*.6

Bishop Laurence receives a scourging during a night vision and shows the marks to king Eadbald, one of Sæberht's sons, who repents and 'banned all idolatrous worship, gave up his unlawful wife, accepted the Christian faith, and was baptized'.

15. Paulinus before king Edwin's conversion, *HE* II.9

Before the conversion of king Edwin, bishop Paulinus was sent to the king's court in Northumbria and attempted to convert 'some of the heathen', but is unsuccessful because as Bede quotes from 2 Corinthians 4:4 'The god of this world blinded the minds of them'. There is no direct criticism of Christianity. Edwin however is described as sitting alone and contemplating what to do for long periods of silence.

16. James the Deacon, *HE* II.20

James the Deacon works in York to teach and baptize the local people, and instructs people in singing 'after the manner of Rome and the Kentish people'.

17. King Osric, *HE* III.1

King Osric of Deira becomes a Christian 'through the preaching of Paulinus'. The sons of Æthelfrith in the same chapter become Christians when in exile among the Irish or Picts, but abandon their faith when they become kings, Eanfrith of Bernicia and Osric of Deira (the latter possibly the king's nephew rather than son). This baptism is discussed in the main body of the thesis.

18. St Ninian, *HE* III.4

St Ninian converts the southern Picts through 'preaching'.

19. Aidan's predecessor, *HE* III.5

Aidan's predecessor as missionary to king Oswald's people failed because he was of 'harsher disposition' than Aidan, and Aidan himself criticises him for being 'unreasonably harsh upon your ignorant hearers'. The failed missionary himself blames the people for being 'intractable, obstinate, and uncivilized'. This is an interesting and rare record of criticism of a Christian missionary coming from another Christian missionary.

20. Birinus, *HE* III.7

Bishop Birinus converts the West Saxons through 'preaching' during the reign of king Cynegisl, but his son Cenwealh succeeds him and refuses to receive the faith for unspecified reasons, until he is driven into exile and becomes a Christian.

21. King Sigeberht, *HE* III.18

King Sigeberht becomes king of East Anglia, having become a Christian during exile in Gaul.

22. King Peada, *HE* III.21

King Peada of the Middle Angles asks king Oswiu if he can marry his daughter Alhflæd and is told he can only do so if he becomes a Christian, which he does after he 'heard the truth proclaimed'.

23. King Sigeberht, *HE* III.22

King Sigeberht of East Anglia is converted while visiting king Oswiu in Northumbria, and subsequently killed back in his own kingdom because of his Christian morality, as described in the main body of the thesis.

24. Kings Sigehere and Sebbi, *HE* III.30

This incident records a rejection of Christianity. Sigehere and Sebbi became kings of the East Saxons but when the kingdom suffers from plague in 664 Sigehere "deserted the sacraments of the Christian faith and apostatized. For the king himself and the majority of both commons and nobles loved this present life, seeking no other and not even believing in any future existence; so they began to restore the derelict temples and worship images, as if they could protect themselves by such means from the plague." Sebbi however says true to his faith, and in due course bishop Jaruman is sent to the kingdom and converts it back again through preaching.

25. King Cædwalla, *HE* IV.16

The Isle of Wight is captured by king Cædwalla. Rather confusingly, Bede says he was not yet a Christian but promised to give a quarter of the island to the church if he were victorious, enabling St Wilfrid to appoint a priest to teach and administer baptism there.

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